

15/05/01

**The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam)** (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education and Scientific Research whether, in regard to the proposed reform in education, he will –

- (a) state the reasons for the elimination of star schools in the public sector only and the consequential creation of super star colleges in the private sector;
- (b) spell out in detail the practical measures he will take to ensure that admissions by the new grading system will be done in a fair and transparent manner, and
- (c) state the measures he will take to ensure the continued existence of private secondary schools.

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker Sir, as the House is aware the latest document on Reforms on Education refers to the vexed issue of C.P.E. ranking and democratisation of access to Secondary Education.

For recall, at present, each year some 28,000 children attempt the CPE Examination which is the most important examination of our educational system in as much as compulsory education ends at the CPE and no child can get admitted to the secondary without passing the CPE. Of the 28,000 candidates each year some 9,000 fail and repeat Std VI. Of the repeaters, half again fail and until this year were, in general, condemned to the wilderness with all the attendant dangers. And the other half does go on to the secondary but with minute chances of any significant academic achievement thereafter. From the 18,000 or so who pass, some 1,000 have to be selected for admission to the perceived star schools, hence the notorious ranking system. It is well known that the extreme and inhuman competition associated with ranking imposes tremendous stress upon children, parents and teachers alike. CPE ranking is anti-pedagogical in that it vitiates the role of the school by making of ranking students its paramount objective. CPE ranking is unjust in that it is based on subject assessment of 1 hour 45 mins to determine once and for all the intellectual worth of a child and his mastery of a programme taught over six years.

Ranking, Mr Speaker, Sir, is an essential support of the star schools system and it is as precise as it is harsh and arbitrary. Precise in that it ranks students by the one decimal point and arbitrary in that it purports to establish an intellectual hierarchy as between students having already attained with a grade A the desirable learning competencies as defined by experts.

It is therefore obvious that ranking has to go. The point is to understand the connection between star schools and ranking. Without star

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schools, there is no need for ranking which is nothing but an instrument of selection. Likewise without ranking, there can be no star schools as we know that whatever residual selection persists on the basis of grading will guarantee the entry of students with a wider range of abilities in anyone school.

The objective of Government is therefore to do away with existing perceived star schools and to gradually make of all our secondary schools star schools in the sense of being centres of excellence.

Accordingly, 11 perceived State star schools will be transformed into Form VI colleges and at least six additional new Form VI colleges built. This will allow for significant democratisation. For instance, each year QEC attracts only 140 students of the corresponding Form I age group. As a Form VI college, the QEC will accommodate each year at least 400 from the Lower VI age group. Another example - at present the Form I intake of State secondary schools is approximately 4,400. In 2006, with the new construction, extension and upgrading of REDCO and MEDCO schools, the State sector will take on board 11,500 students newly three times as many. If that is not democratisation, what is?

Now, I take the term "Super Star Schools" to refer to the high demand school of the private sector. I do not subscribe to the use of such terminology. But, in any case, Government's attitude towards the private sector, within which we no longer distinguish between confessional or non confessional is as follows -

- (1) On a philosophical plan, government does not believe in the imposition of anyone model of schooling, that is, *l'Ecole Unique* on parents. The reform project is, therefore, formulated in a manner to allow for diversity, pluralism and flexibility.
  - (2) By virtue of the intimate connection between star schools and CPE ranking, it stands to reason that conversion of all perceived star schools into Form VI colleges would have allowed for faster and easier obtention of parity of public esteem for all secondary schools. Such was our preferred solution and that was made known to the private sector.
  - (3) However, in a sector as sensitive as education, to attempt to impose such a far reaching reform upon the private sector would have been a sure recipe for disaster. It would have brought things to a standstill and condemned the reform process to failure right from the start.
  - (4) The private sector has nonetheless been invited to consider the possibility of moving in the same or similar direction to the State so
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as to support the reform process. We have ample time on our hands and shall discuss the matter afresh in due course with the private sector. In the meantime, Government is forging ahead with practical preparation for the reform.

As regards part (b) of the question, it should be recalled that at present the State attributes form I places only in secondary schools on the so-called computer list which includes all State secondary schools, MEDCO schools, all private confessional schools and a few volunteering private non-confessional schools. The seats attributed by the State concern only half of the places in all confessional schools and allow a considerable room for manoeuvre for managers of private, confessional and non-confessional schools to admit who they wish. In addition, admission to non-computer listed non-confessional private schools is totally within the hands of the managers concerned. Computer listed places number 4400 representing roughly a quarter of the Form I intake. This is very important, Mr Speaker, Sir. At present, the State determines admission of only about a quarter of the Form I intake in the whole secondary sector. What is proposed for 2006 and thereafter is that the State attributes all seats in State secondary schools including MEDCO plus half of seats in all private secondary schools. Such seats should number 17,800 representing some 75%, 3/4 of the Form I intake. That in itself will allow for greater objectivity and transparency in admissions to the secondary sector.

Other places would be attributed as at present by management of private schools. However, it has always been Government's intention to ensure that transparency should prevail everywhere. As stated previously, the modalities of implementation of the reform project and, in particular, the admission system will be discussed with the private sector in the weeks to come.

Turning to part (c) of the question, the document released presents a detailed analysis of the impact of the proposed reforms on the private sector with full details of demand and supply figures for places at both Form I and lower VI levels for 2001 and 2006. Being given that the increase in seat capacity of the State sector will be accompanied by increased demand due to generalised opening of pre-vocational classes and subsequently compulsory 11-year schooling, no closures of private secondary schools should ensue from the reform project *per se*. However, one should acknowledge the existence of some substandard secondary schools identified since 1983 and in relation to which there is a wide consensus as between all stakeholders that they should gradually be phased out. In such an eventuality, Government has given an undertaking of re-deployment for students, security of employment of staff and fair treatment for managers concerned.

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In any case, joint committees will be established between the Ministry of Education and private managers and their staff respectively to analyse the reforms and monitor their implementation. The hon. Leader of the Opposition will also have noted that the document includes a reference to a package of incentives for upgrading to be provided to managers of private secondary schools.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has taken twelve minutes to repeat a lot of things that he has said. May be he has good intentions and we had told him last week that we know the difficulties. But he, himself, has said in his statement yesterday - and he has repeated it in his answer today - that the preferred solution would have been that the private sector transformed their colleges into Form VI colleges, but they have refused. The Minister himself is saying that it is not his preferred solution, that he has failed to get the private sector to accept that they convert their schools into Form VI colleges like he is doing in the public sector. Therefore, by this admission itself, does he not agree that it is discriminatory? How is it possible that one section which he would have wished ....

*(Interruptions)*

It is not democracy! It is discriminatory! The Minister agrees that this is not what he wishes, but he is giving in to what they are saying, and on the other hand, he says that he will carry on. So, he is creating an education *à deux vitesses*. Does he not agree that it is discriminatory since he, himself, said that it is not his preferred solution?

**Mr Obegadoo:** No, Mr Speaker, Sir, I do not agree. What I have said, and I repeat, at the present time, 75% of seats for Form I are attributed outside the ambit of supervision by the State. What we are going to do within the next five years is to turn the situation around. 75% of seats in Form I will be attributed by the State on the computer list thereby guaranteeing much greater objectivity and transparency throughout.

Mr Speaker, Sir, as regards the private sector, we have opted for a relationship of partnership, consultation and dialogue, which have borne its fruits and the living example is the prevocational classes which have been set into existence a few months back and which now guarantee that education for all our children at age 12, whether they fail or pass the CPE, is available, if they so wish it. That in itself is a miracle and it was achieved through collaboration, partnership with the private sector, and that is our guiding principle. What we know is that the present situation is really traumatic, Mr Speaker, Sir. Yesterday, I received two heartbreaking letters

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from parents. One has a child in Std II in a school in the east and has to take tuition and he was complaining of how much he has to pay for tuition. The other is the parent of a child in Std V who is asking us to look again at availability of premises for private tuition because his child begins taking tuition at 7.30 in the morning, gets back home after 5.00 p.m., has dinner and then goes back to homework. That is what we are trying to change, Mr Speaker, Sir, and we had two options. We could have gone to the private sector with preconceived ideas, imposed a solution and then, only then, the private sector would, of course, have said no and we would have ended with a deadlock, with maybe a Court battle lasting years, and it would have been the end to any hope of reform. And the Leader of the Opposition knows what I am talking about. When he was Prime Minister, there were attempts, however good intentions there were, but because one went about it the wrong way, everything stalled, and there was no reform. I am saying that because of the dramatic situation one needs to move forward. The reforms we are proposing may not be the ideal solution to solve all problems for all times. But then, we do not live in an ideal world. We have our feet firmly rooted in reality. We want to make one step forward. That step is, in fact, a major stride forward. And then, with time things will change. I always give the example of Singapore where the State showed the way and the private sector freely followed.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, it would be good if you could ask the Minister to answer the questions. He is giving long statements and this won't leave time for me to put questions, unless you give me more time. He is denying me the opportunity to ask him further questions.

**Mr Speaker:** I have always said that I don't have any control on replies. Of course, if a question is asked...

**The Prime Minister:** He must make it sink into the head of the Leader of the Opposition!

**Mr Speaker:** Order! If the question asked is about education and the Minister replies about football, then I can say it's not relevant and stop him, but since his reply is relevant to education, I cannot stop him.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** What they are doing will sink into the heads of lots of people! The Minister says that we don't live in an ideal world. Of course, we don't live in an ideal world. Who does not know that we don't live in an ideal world? But what the Minister is saying is that he will give in to those who are powerful and have strong lobby.

*(Interruptions)*

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That's what he has said. He has said that he does not agree that that was the preferred solution, but that since they did not agree, he will impose the other solution on them. How can the Minister expect that the vast majority of the people of this country will accept this reform *à deux vitesses qu'il est en train de suggérer?*

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, I explained very frankly and honestly that we are not interested in having sterile quarrels and pointless controversies with the private sector. What we are interested in is moving forward. I am very attentive to the points raised by the Opposition. I am open to any positive suggestions that we can use to better our proposals. But we have the choice to either move forward or stand still through confrontation. Let me add that the stand of the private sector is, I understand, not to be frozen in time. The private sector has been invited to reflect, to debate with us and others, and eventually, I am convinced that with time the private sector will follow.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** The Minister said he has ample time. We don't want the same thing that happened in the past to happen again. I know the hon. Prime Minister knows what I am referring to. You can't give one part now, and say you will give the rest later on. The package must be dealt with straightaway. On the one hand, the Minister says he is going to abolish the Forms I to V classes in public star schools to which admission is now being obtained by ranking and strictly on merit. On the other hand, he says that he will maintain the admission to similar schools in the private sector based on other criteria, not just merit. How does he explain that?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** With all due respect and without meaning in any way to be unpleasant, this situation has existed for many, many years - for 25 years as far as I am aware. Over the last 4½ years, the former Prime Minister did not manage to change that. I repeat, at least, what we are doing - hopefully, with his support eventually - is to move forward.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** It's not a question of our support. The question is that the plan is so lopsided. That is why we are opposed to it. The Minister is proposing part of the reform plan, but not the reform plan as he wanted it to be. That is the problem with his plan. How can he, for example, tell us that the grading system to admit students in Form I in certain star schools is alright, but that this is not the case for the other schools? Doesn't he agree that what is good for one should be good for the others?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, I am very surprised. I explained in clear and simple English that, at the present time, 75% of places at Form I

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