

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

EDUCATIONAL REFORMS - PUBLIC/PRIVATE SECTOR
PARTNERSHIP

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) (*by Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education & Scientific Research whether, in regard to the agreements signed with non-governmental secondary schools, he will-

- (a) state the names of the parties with whom negotiations were held, the persons who attended each meeting and the dates thereof;
- (b) lay on the Table of the Assembly the minutes of proceedings of all the meetings, and
- (c) state whether any ceiling has been agreed on the amounts to be spent by each party on extensions and new buildings and the grants to be provided for repayment of the loans.

Mr Obeegadoo: Sir, may I be allowed to bid the Leader of Opposition Good Morning and thank him for yet another opportunity to explain the strong public/private sector partnership underlying the process of structural reforms in education.

On 11 June 2002, five Memoranda of Understanding were signed by the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research on the one hand and on the other hand the following parties respectively-

- (i) The Arya Sabha as represented by Messrs R. Neevoor, N. Ghoorah on behalf of the D.A.V. College;
 - (ii) The Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Port Louis, Monseigneur Piat, the Provincial of Loreto Institution, Sister Paule Arunasalon and the Provincial of Filles de Marie Institute, Sister Rosaline M. O'Kane as responsible parties for the Catholic colleges;
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- (iii) The Halkae-Quadria Ishaat-I-Islam as represented by Messrs I. Ebrahim Dawood, Abdool Sackoor Husnoo on behalf of Aleemiah College;
- (iv) The Hindu Girls Association as represented by Miss Pochun and Mr Domah on behalf of the Hindu Girls College, and
- (v) the Islamic Cultural Association as represented by Messrs Heerah and Bashir Taleb on behalf of the Islamic Cultural College.

Allow me, Mr Speaker, Sir, to remind the House of the background to these agreements. In May 2001, Government presented its programme of structural reforms in secondary education, which provided, *inter alia*, for the conversion of all State 'star' secondary schools into Form VI colleges and the conversion of other State secondary schools into Forms I to V secondary schools. Thereafter, the general feeling, both in government and within public opinion, was that all very high demand secondary schools should likewise cease admission of Form I students. Hence, discussions got under way with the Catholic Church concerning their joining the structural reform process. As discussions progressed, Government received expressions of interest from other confessional colleges and accordingly initiated discussions with the latter so as to reach a broader and shared understanding of the reform process. Accordingly, at different times, between June 2001 and June 2002, the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research met with representatives of the parties already mentioned culminating in the agreements of June 2002.

The Memoranda of Understanding were structured in the following manner-

- (a) A preamble wherein signatory parties subscribe to an effective partnership and continuous consultation, reaffirm their commitment to improving the teaching and learning process and to the further development of pre-vocational education in line with Government policy to introduce 11-year compulsory, universal and free schooling.

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- (b) Fundamental principles which provide that there shall be no redundancy, no loss of acquired rights and same conditions of service for staff irrespective of posting in a Form I to V or Form VI institution. In addition, the present system of admission to the private confessional schools will continue to operate with criteria for admission in the case of the Catholic colleges being published and made known to all. In the particular case of Catholic colleges, it is agreed that there shall be no loss and no gain in the global number of seats offered at Form I mainstream and Lower VI levels.
- (c) As regards conversion and construction, all existing secondary institutions, including the pre-vocational departments of the Catholic colleges, with the exception of Loreto College Mahebourg and College de la Confiance, will be converted into either Forms I to V or Form VI colleges with signatory parties contracting soft loans from the Development Bank of Mauritius to finance conversion costs. Where the present set-up does not lend itself to the operation of such separate institutions such as in the case of Aleemiah College, D.A.V. College, Hindu Girls College and Islamic College, State land will be leased for the purposes of constructing a new secondary institution.

As regards to general conditions, the private schools concerned will continue to operate according to their own specific philosophies with Government grants being provided as per established policy except for a new grant formula for Form VI colleges which will be evolved by the Management Audit Bureau in due course. Further, all conversion costs will be met by the relevant colleges through concessionary DBM loans, the repayment of which will be facilitated by additional grants, as appropriate with safeguards for the State.

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In the case of construction on State land, financed through DBM loans, the buildings shall remain the property of the State, but leased to the relevant operator. Alternatively, if construction is self-financed, ownership of the building will pass to the operator.

The MoUs also stipulate some special conditions relating, *inter alia*, to preservation of existing posts, curriculum development, establishment of a pre-vocational stream, upgrading of teachers obtaining additional qualifications and eventual review of management structure.

Further, a transition period is provided for in the MoUs so that existing schools being converted into Forms I to V colleges achieve full conversion by the beginning of 2005 and those being converted into Form VI colleges by the beginning of 2007, with some degree of flexibility as, for example, in the case of BPS College.

As regards part (a) of the question, the different signatory parties may have had different representatives at various stages of the discussions, but the signatories I mentioned earlier were the key partners involved throughout. My Ministry does not hold a record of all persons that would have attended each and every meeting and the dates of all such meetings. It should be understood that while some meetings were chaired by the Minister, various sub-committees met on different occasions and there was no need for formal minutes of proceedings being drawn up inasmuch as discussions centred on a draft MoU. So much for part (b) of the question.

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As regards part (c) of the question, the financial arrangements agreed are as follows - insofar as capital investment for construction/conversion are concerned, the financial assistance provide by the State will take the form of loan to be contracted with DBM repayable over 20 years at a concessionary rate of interest to be determined. These loans will be subject to ceilings as follows-

- (i) conversion of existing schools into Forms I to V colleges, maximum R 3 m.;
- (ii) conversion of existing schools into Form VI colleges, maximum R 6 m., and
- (iii) conversion of pre-vocational departments into Forms I to V schools, maximum R 11.1 m.

For constructions of new Form VI colleges, the maximum loans would be of R 35 m. with a 20-year repayment period and concessionary rate of interest to be determined. As regards the recurrent costs, Government will maintain existing grants payable for operation and maintenance of the schools and will provide a special grant to each of them to meet the cost of repayment of loans contracted with DBM, except for the pre-vocational departments and new constructions where the operators will be called upon to use 80% of the annual rental value (ARV) element of the normal PSSA grant for loan repayment purposes. May I be allowed to remind the House that, in essence, the MoUs signed are identical except for the fact that the Catholic Church has opted for conversion of existing schools and departments whereas Arya Sabha, Halkae-Quadria Ishaat-I-Islam, Hindu Girls Association and Islamic Cultural Association have been offered the possibility of constructing new buildings. In any event, financial facilities for all parties are the same.

Mr Speaker, Sir, may I recall that the Memoranda of Understanding have been made freely available to any interested party as from date of signature. I am accordingly, and with your permission, Mr Speaker, hereby tabling a copy of each of the five MoUs signed on 11 June 2002.

(Contd)

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PNQ (contd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Minister, but this very long answer. I am a bit surprised that he says there were no minutes of proceedings, no records of the persons who attended the meetings. Does he find it normal, for such an important agreement, that there are no records of the minutes of proceedings, no records of who were the persons who attended the meetings?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, I find that perfectly normal, indeed. What is important is the Memorandum of Understanding, the formal agreement, which was eventually reached and signed between the Ministry and the other party. That Memorandum of Understanding has been made public, ever since the date of signature. Before that, as I said, there were many, many meetings, various sub-committees, at different points in time, looking at PSSA grants, upgrading of teachers, curriculum development for Form VI schools, the pedagogical project for the new schools, the modalities of conversions of pre-vocational departments. These committees were chaired by different civil servants from Education. All that work came together in the form of a draft Memorandum of Understanding, which was placed on the table, and as meetings went on, this Memorandum of Understanding was revised and bettered until we reached the final agreement, which was signed in June.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can the Minister say whether the negotiations with these parties were done separately or all together?

Mr Obeegadoo: The negotiations were separate, in that they began at different moments in time. We had to respect the specificities of each of the parties, but there was a common ceremony of signature when all the parties were brought together, explained the contents of the different MOUs which, as I said, are in essence identical and, therefore, there was a common ceremony for the signature.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Would the Minister be in a position to say how many meetings he had with each party?

Mr Obeegadoo: That would be very difficult, indeed, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can he say whether all the private sector non-Governmental schools were invited, one way or the other, to attend those meetings?

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PNQ (Contd)

Mr Obeegadoo: No, Mr Speaker, Sir. I would not like to repeat an answer, which the Leader of the Opposition considers to have been very long. Discussions started with the Catholic Church. Why the Catholic Church? Because everybody knows that there are a number of very high demand secondary schools operated by the Catholic Church. That is why, ever since the National Education Commission of 1995 and ever since the Action Plan, it was always foreseen that those schools belonging to the Catholic Church would cease admitting form I students. So, we started discussing with the Catholic Church. As things moved on, there were definite expressions of interest, for instance, from Hindu Girls College. So, discussions started with Hindu Girls College. At a later stage, there were other expressions of interest from, respectively, Aleemiah, D.A.V and Islamic Colleges. We had meetings with the different parties, discussing what would constitute an agreement, explaining the philosophy of the reforms, and, thereafter, things accelerated at the beginning of this year, ending up with these MoUs. Let me make it very clear that we did also try to see whether other confessional schools were interested, because all these MoUs concern the confessional schools within the private sector. I had a meeting with the association of confessional schools immediately following the signature of these Memoranda of Understanding. The only other school that has expressed an interest, is Muslim Girls College, with which we are now talking to see how we can accommodate their interest, although initially they had shown no interest. As regards the other non-confessional private colleges, I am meeting regularly with the federation of managers, working with them, in accordance with budgetary provisions in the last Budget, to progress towards parity of esteem, by helping assisting in the upgrading of the whole non-confessional private sector.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am glad the Minister finally clarified that he started negotiation with the Catholic schools. But, can he say whether the others responded, by informing him that they were not interested, or were they not at all approached?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, should I repeat? In May 2001, when we presented the proposals of Government for structural reform, that is, the conversion of schools into either Form VI or Forms I to V, a number of private colleges, non-confessional, said that they were not interested. We then opened discussions with the Catholic Church, because there was a general feeling, as I said, both within Government and across public opinion generally, that to the extent that the Catholic

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PNQ (contd)

Church operates a number of very high demand secondary schools, they had to be involved if the structural reform process was to have any significant impact. That is why discussions started with the Catholic Church who gave their in principle agreement to joining the process. Thereafter, other schools that had their own projects, for example, the Hindu Girls College, which, as from early 2001, had told us that they were looking forward to establishing some sort of a Form VI cum polytechnic institution. So, they were very eager and happy to join in the process, and negotiations started early on. Others followed, and this is why, at the end of the day, of the confessional sector in private secondary education, four colleges have come in and signed Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministry of Education. As I said, there have been belated expressions of interest from Muslim Girls, which we are trying to accommodate.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can the Minister say whether the other private non-confessional schools have shown any interest or have they said that they are not at all interested in joining in?

Mr Obeegadoo: Since the signing of the Memoranda of Understanding, different private non-confessional colleges have asked for acceleration in the discussions concerning their part in the shaping of the future of secondary education. This is why we are now working with the federation of managers, discussing all the different aspects of the reform process, to see how they can fit in.

Dr. Ramgoolam: When the Minister produced his paper "ending the Rat Race", he said that he would not review, he would not go piece-meal. That is exactly what he is doing now. He is actually going piece-meal. Reform is being done on a piece-meal basis.

Mr Obeegadoo: What was said in May 2001 was that Government was making known publicly its programme of structural reforms for the State sector, and the private sector would be free to join or not to join. In the days following this public presentation, there were strong feelings expressed in public that the Catholic Church should join in. Government made a special appeal to the Catholic Church; there was a public debate over many weeks, and the Catholic Church then said that they were agreeable in principle. We sat down and started discussing, and then followed all the events I have just described.

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PNQ (contd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: We are talking about public funds being involved here. So, does the Minister consider it proper to use public funds – public money, in other words - to build extensions and new schools, to be used for students who will be admitted not in accordance with the same criteria?

Mr Obeegadoo: Let me say two things, Mr Speaker. First of all, these Memoranda of Understanding have nothing to do with admission criteria as regards private colleges. The previous Government had 4½ long years and chose not to put into question admission criteria. The Memoranda of Understanding which have been signed have nothing to do with admission criteria, which is a separate and totally different issue. We are talking about structural reforms, that is, for very high demand schools not to admit Form I students.

My second point is that we are committed to raising standards and offering good quality education in all of our institutions. We know that, today, the private colleges, which number more than 100, admit some 80%, if not more, of our students at Form I level. There is a choice. There was that of the Action Plan, which former Minister Pillay maintains was approved by Government, which proposed no less than the wholesale nationalisation of education, by having some 60 middle schools admitting all students at Form I level. Let us recall what it said. We have made the choice of a plurality, of a diversity of choice for parents. We believe in parental choice and we believe in providing a diversity of schools, with different types of education being offered to parents and to the public at large. That is precisely what is being done. As from January 2003, there will be a choice as between State schools and non-State schools. Within non-State schools, there are private fee paying and private subsidised, where you have free education. Within the subsidised sector, there are the confessional schools, within which the majority will be offering either Forms I to V or Form VI, and the non-confessional schools. We believe in parental choice, and Government is committed to assisting...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker, allow me to answer the question. The question raised...

(Interruptions)

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PNQ (contd.)

Mr Speaker: Order! I am calling the House to order. Order please. I have said in the House that I have no control over the replies. I have control over the questions, but I leave it to the Minister to be specific and reply to the questions.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, what was the question? The question was whether the Minister of Education deems it fit that public funds should be used to assist private institutions which have their own admission criteria. I have explained that these Memoranda of Understanding have nothing to do with admission criteria. As regards the use of public funds, I have explained that the private sector is doing a service to the nation by accommodating more than 80% of our students. Was it not for the private sector, we would not have been able to offer secondary education to our students; and now we want the private sector to upgrade, how do we do this? There has been in existence for many years a loan scheme at the DBM. This loan scheme is not being used because the conditions offered are not attractive to private secondary school Managers. Government is committed not to nationalise or to abolish the private sector in education, but to work with the private sector in a healthy relationship as long as standards can be maintained and improved. To do so, there is a clear commitment reflected in the last Budget to provide ways and means for the private sector to be able to upgrade their institutions.

Dr. Ramgoolam: It is misleading for the Minister to say that public funds have nothing to do with it. Public funds are involved and the criteria for admission....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! I am on my feet. Hon. Leader of the Opposition, I would like you to withdraw the word 'misleading'; it is not parliamentary.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Well, we'll use whatever word we want to use, if he is not misleading, he is trying to say untruths! I am asking the question again: is it not a fact that the State has no control on the admission criteria to these schools and yet it is using public funds for these schools?

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Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me remind the House that ever since 1977 almost all private schools have been non fee paying. Ever since 1977, that is, for the last 25 years, for the last quarter of a century, at the initiative of the then Labour Government in 1977 we have had a system whereby all the non fee paying private secondary schools are fully funded by the State. The present admission system exists since that time.

(Interruptions)

Dr. David: See the reaction. *C'est la réaction de la peur.* They are afraid of questions, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Speaker: Order please! Hon. David, take your seat. I would like to draw the attention of the House that the world is watching us.

Dr. David: It is looking at a shameful Government! I know, Mr Speaker, Sir, that they are afraid when I ask questions. Let me refer to part (b) of the question. Does the Minister find it normal that for meetings held at the Ministry of Education, for issues that he considers to be important, there have been no minutes of proceedings, no names of persons attending, no number of meetings held. Consequently, for part (b) of the question, we will get absolutely no document laid on the Table of the Assembly. Do I get it that it is a negative answer for part (b) of the question?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, the end result is what matters and it is embodied in the Memorandum of Understanding which has been placed at the disposal of everyone.

Dr. David: Mr Speaker, Sir, we are not referring to the MoU, we are referring to part (b) of the question about the minutes of proceedings of all meetings. So, do we take it that there will be absolutely no ...

Mr Speaker: I am expecting a question from you, hon. David.

Dr. David: This is the question, Sir.

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Mr Dullo: Sir, the hon. Minister has been referring to the various non-Government schools, including confessional schools, but I have not heard him mention certain confessional colleges like the St Andrew's College and the Adventist College. So, may I ask him whether they are parties to the agreement and what would happen to those colleges?

Mr Obeegadoo: These colleges have been consulted after the signing of these MoUs. Before they showed no expression of interest and afterwards they stated in no uncertain terms that they were not interested in the structural reform process.

Mr Dullo: Questions have been asked about the funding because we know that there are grants formula right now which are being practised. So, I understand that there are new grants formula that are being worked out by the Management Audit Bureau. When will this be made known to those colleges and also communicated to the House?

Mr Obeegadoo: Other colleges are perfectly happy and we are in constant contact and discussing. These new grants concern Form VI colleges which will only come into operation in January next year. The grants will, in fact, be worked out in consultation with the operators concerned and that will be finalised in the coming months.

Mr Clair: Sir, since now we have not heard about the signature of the agreement between the Government and the Catholic and Anglican Dioceses in Rodrigues, I would like to know when the agreement will be signed.

Mr Obeegadoo: Well, I am happy to announce to the House that discussions have now been completed and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Catholic and Anglican Dioceses of Rodrigues will be signed shortly.

Mr Dullo: Sir, I understand that the whole management structure is being looked at. Am I given to understand that Form I to V and Form VI colleges will have to introduce a management structure which is akin to what is obtainable in Government State secondary schools?

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Mr Obeegadoo: What I have said, Sir, is that initially there will be no basic difference in terms of management structure for Form VI colleges and secondary schools offering Forms I to V. For instance, a school which has a rector and which becomes a I to V school will preserve the post of rector and acquired rights will be fully respected. Now, in the future, as we take time to consider the Mahadeo Report on a new pedagogical project for Form VI colleges we will envisage changes which are acceptable to all partners and parents concerning management in the best interest of our children.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Speaker, Sir, the Minister has stated very clearly that there would be no loss of acquired rights, that Government will honour all its obligations. Can I ask him why is it that within one and the same system, where some schools have expressed their intention to participate in the reform, different facilities and incentives are being granted to the schools?

Mr Obeegadoo: Government has a programme of structural reforms in education. Government encourages and welcomes any private college which joins the process. Government is therefore duty bound to assist in this transition to the new set-up, and that is why all the schools or the groups which have subscribed to the Memoranda of Understanding are being assisted.

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(PNQ CONT'D)

Dr. Boolell: Why is it then that in respect of the transition period, the time is different for D.A.V and Hindu Girls colleges compared to the other confessional schools?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Prime Minister: Shame! Shame!

Mr Speaker: Order, please! Hon Dr. Boolell, Order!

(Interruptions)

I would like to listen to the reply. Hon. Boolell!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please!

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, for the conversion of existing schools into either Form I to Form V or Form VI, it is a gradual process with the time frame identical for all schools. For instance, a present school which is doing Form I to Form VI and which is going to convert into Form I to Form V will need two years to phase out the Form VI. And a school converting into a Form I to Form V will need five years to convert into a fully Form VI college. There is one exception which has been created for BPS and Notre Dame colleges. Why is that? In the case of the Catholic colleges, the MoUs have frozen the intake at Form I level and at Lower VI level. In other words, in 2002, the Catholic colleges taken together admitted 1,480 students in Form I. In 2003, irrespective of the reforms they will admit 1,480 and it will be the same in 2004, 2005 and 2006. There is a no loss no gain principle enshrined in the agreement with the Catholic Church. That is not necessarily the case for the other schools which are relatively small schools, like Hindu Girls, D.A.V., Islamic and Aleemiah; with a second institution they may increase their intake at Form I or lower VI. Because they may do so, there is no problem. They will build a new school and they will have greater intake capacity.

In the case of the Catholic schools, they are bound to admit no less and no more than the number of students admitted in 2002. Therefore, they have particular difficulties in terms of number of classrooms so as to balance the figures on the girls' side and for the boys because all these colleges are single sex. It has been necessary, I believe, for those two schools that it be put

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(PNQ CONT'D)

off by one year for the transition period to start. So, my answer is there is a difference only in the case of two institutions and that exception is linked to the no loss no gain principle in terms of seats applicable to the Catholic Church and not applicable to the other four partners.

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up. I am allowing a last question to the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister made a point of talking about the agreement with the MGI as soon as he had signed the agreements. Can I ask him what negotiations he had with the MGI?

Mr Obeegadoo: Thank you. I hadn't had time to broach that subject. Mahatma Gandhi Institute is a very important operator within the educational field and within the perspective of the global restructuring of the whole secondary education sector, we want to promote the Mahatma Gandhi Institute as an operator providing educational services. So, instead of, as I said, one MGI, we will have RTI, MGI and at least four Mahatma Gandhi secondary schools in operation as from January 2003. Now, all along we have been discussing with the Indian High Commission. We had also been in touch with the chairperson and Director of the MGI. These contacts are ongoing. I am told that only last week the Board of the MGI was discussing the matter and is coming up with new proposals for the new organisational structure of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. So, we are endeavouring to take on board everybody, including all the unions of staff of the MGI.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me to ask one more question because it is important for the follow-up.

Mr Speaker: I'll allow the hon. Leader of the Opposition a very short question for a short reply.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I just want to ask the Minister since the MGI is a parastatal body governed by Statute, by an Act of Parliament, is he saying, therefore, that he negotiated with his own nominees on the Board?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I believe I have already answered that question fully.
