

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

EDUCATION SECTOR - REFORMS - STAKEHOLDERS

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education and Scientific Research whether, in view of the fact that there is a public outcry against his proposed reforms in education, he will say -

- (a) who are the stakeholders he has met since their publication;
- (b) if he is now aware of all the measures which are considered to be discriminatory and unfair by the various stakeholders and, if so, will he state them, and
- (c) whether he will now review his proposals in order to address those issues.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr. Speaker Sir, I take strong objection to the misleading allegation that there is public outcry against the latest Government Plan for structural reform of our educational system.

There is, in fact, wide consensus and overwhelming support within public opinion for 90% of the proposed reforms, namely -

- (i) the abolition of ranking at CPE to do away with the rat race affecting some 130,000 students of the primary sector, their parents and teachers at any one time;
 - (ii) replacement of ranking by the system of grading which is pedagogically sound and has proved its worth in other countries;
 - (iii) an accelerated programme for extension/conversion/upgrading and construction of State Secondary Schools throughout the island so as to democratise access to quality education and ensure that the State caters not only for a privileged few but for the many;
-

unrevised

- (iv) pedagogical measures to guard against any “*nivellement par le bas*” and to ensure that special needs of the brightest as well as those with learning difficulties are specifically and permanently attended to;
- (v) the preservation of a healthy dose of competition within the system;
- (vi) the principal of regionalisation to bring education through schools closer to the child rather than having children of 11 criss-crossing the country in the quest for knowledge;
- (vii) improved measures for a proper and effective management of State schools;
- (viii) establishment of clear lines of accountability, and close monitoring of performance to obtain within time parity of public esteem for all public schools; and
- (ix) the enhancement of the strong partnership with the private sector in education through dialogue so as to promote educational excellence throughout the island.

There is only one dimension of the reform which has led to reservations being expressed in certain quarters.

As regards part (a) of the question, the latest reform plan was presented, in line with our policy of talking directly to stakeholders, to all stakeholders concerned on Thursday 10 May at the Vaghjee Hall. The stakeholders concerned included all Unions of secondary schools personnel, both Federations of Parent/Teacher Associations in existence, all Associations of Managers of private secondary schools including the *Bureau de l'Education Catholique*. Since then, I have embarked on a process of information and explanation concerning the Reform Plan while listening to all participants in the debate. I have thus met all Rectors of State Secondary Schools together with the Secondary Inspectorate and Principal and Senior Education Officers. I have also met the Hindu Socio-Cultural Organisations, the Catholic Authorities together with the *Bureau de l'Education Catholique*, the Council and staff of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and various groups of students.

D10/P01/mt/3

(PNQ) CONTD.

This very valuable process of explaining the reforms and listening to various views and opinions will proceed in the days to come with meetings scheduled with the Teachers Unions, students, representatives of the personnel of all secondary schools and private managers. Should the Opposition consider itself a stakeholder in the education of our children, I remain at their disposal to meet and discuss their concerns.

As regards part (b) of the reform, I take, once again, strong objection to the insinuation that "various stakeholders" have expressed themselves against the reform. In fact, apart from rumblings of discontent at Royal College Curepipe and Royal College Port Louis, the response from students in general has so far been very positive. Apart from the Parent/Teacher's Association of Royal College Curepipe, parents of students have not expressed themselves against the reform. Apart from the public stand of one of the three Staff Unions of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, the only other Union to have expressed itself on the reform has been the Union of Private Secondary Education Employees (UPSEE), which has given unqualified support to the reform. The private sector, both confessional and non confessional, initially reacted positively to the reform, but have yet to formally define their role within the reform plan.

It is very significant, that apart from one of the three Mahatma Gandhi Institute Unions and the Parent/Teacher Association of Royal College Curepipe and associated students, there has been no opposition from within the educational sector. The reaction of those just referred to was all the time predictable and perfectly understandable. Hence, Government continues its efforts to explain and convince.

It is also very telling, Mr Speaker, Sir, that the first, and indeed strongest, negative reactions should have come not from educationists, but from outside the educational field.

The one dimension of the Reform Plan which has indeed led to much debate relates to the eventuality of the non conversion of private star confessional schools into Form VI colleges with attended risks of inequity and injustice. But then, let me, once again, state loud and clear that it has always been Government's wish and preferred solution that all, I repeat all, perceived star schools do not have a Form I intake as from January 2003. Government's stand was made clear to the confessional authorities and there was indeed a difference of opinion in that respect. That is why Government has been very attentive to views and opinions expressed by others in that respect.

(mr/d10/PNQ ctd...)

However, learning from the experiences of the past of which the Leader of Opposition is well aware, we decided not to impose and to take the road to confrontation which always leads to a dead end. Government opted instead to show the way by presenting a blueprint for the public sector of education and, thereafter, to argue its case and convince confident that reason always prevails. I am now, in the light of ongoing discussion and debate, in a position to sound a note of cautious optimism.

Turning to part (c) of the question, we believe that to the extent that the fundamentals of the Reform Plan are very widely accepted, we must forge ahead with extensions, conversions, upgrading and constructions of schools and all other points I referred to earlier. As regards the one problematical dimension of the Reform Plan, we anticipate positive developments in the days to come and, in the meantime, we remain open to helpful and constructive ideas and suggestions. Let me stress the unfortunate fact that criticisms, so far, have been leveled at specific proposals of the Reform Plan and no viable or alternative formula proposed to abolish CPE ranking.

Mr. Speaker Sir, there are two categories of persons speaking out against the Reform Plan. There are the conservatives and reactionaries, the "*passéistes*" who wish the anti-pedagogical CPE rat race to remain as it is and who issue any notion of structural reform in education. Then, there are those who may have reservations on a specific point, I do hope that the Opposition falls within the second category, in which case eleven days after the presentation of the Plan, I still await their positive contribution to the debate.

Mr Speaker Sir, history is replete with examples of progress eliciting negative reactions from a few and that is indeed unavoidable. Rather than to choose the comfortable position of sitting tight on such a sensitive issue, indulging in mere rhetoric and otherwise enjoying the trappings of power, we have chosen to rise to the challenge of proposing a far reaching and democratic transformation of our educational system. Let each one of us now take his stand. History will judge.

(mr/d10/PNQ ctd...),02

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, again I see that the hon. Minister has taken over twelve minutes to answer simple questions, but never mind. Who were the stakeholders the hon. Minister met after the publication and what were the complaints? The hon. Minister must be living in an ivory tower, Mr Speaker, Sir. He does not know that there is a public outcry outside. Where is he living? In what planet is he living? He will take his responsibility, because I can tell him that there is a public outcry and we maintain it; and he will see more and more as the days pass by. Furthermore, it is telling for somebody who has supposedly been the shadow Minister for Education for so many years! What proposals did he make when the Action Plan of ex-Minister Pillay came up? What were the proposals when he was in the Opposition? Nil. He was just criticising it and nothing else. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander! The hon. Minister gives the impression that there is no public outcry, that there is only one issue that is separating the proposals of the Government and the rest of the people, that is, the issue of whether the private star schools will be left to carry on as they want to carry on against the wish of the Minister, that is, not to have Form VI colleges. Can I tell him that this is only one of the elements of the disagreement with his plan. I have told him at the beginning - and I am telling him again - that the Opposition is prepared to cooperate and help him as much as it can, but there are fundamental differences not on one point, but on many points, that is why I asked him last time to freeze his plan. Is the hon. Minister aware that the general view is that the star colleges in the public sector should not be transformed into Form VI colleges as he is planning to do because these are institutions of excellence and they have been institutions of excellence just as the star colleges in the private sector?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me, first of all, remind the Leader of the Opposition that this is the plan of Government. Let that be very clear; it is not my plan; it is the plan of Government. Secondly, the Leader of the Opposition states that the Opposition is willing to support; support means discussing matters of concern. I, as Minister of Education, have taken the unprecedented step, Mr Speaker, Sir, with your permission, of inviting the Opposition and, indeed, all Members of the House systematically, on three occasions, to come and share views and opinions on the Reform Plan. Unfortunately, to my utter regret and dismay, the Opposition did not turn up on the last two occasions and I repeat, once again, that I am at the disposal of the Opposition to sit down together and discuss in a dispassionate non partisan manner the issues of concern to the Opposition. I am there to explain, to try and convince and to listen to any positive suggestions.

(mr/d10/PNQ ctd...).03

Thirdly, as regards the transformation of the so-called star schools, the Leader of the Opposition's former Action Plan which was the plan of the former Government provided precisely for the same thing. The report of the NEC in 1995 provided for precisely the same thing. And what did the Action Plan say? It said that we cannot have star schools taking Form I intake, all secondary schools in existence will become colleges and there will be middle schools everywhere for Form I intake. Because, Mr Speaker, everybody who has carefully looked into this matter has come to the very same conclusion, that the rat race, CPE ranking, is intrinsically linked to the phenomenon of star schools, one cannot exist without the other. If the Opposition, today, can provide me with an alternative route to abolish CPE ranking, I'm willing to listen.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Instead of inviting the Opposition to come and talk to him, as I have said to the hon. Minister, as far as the plan is concerned, there is such a big difference between us and him that there is no point in trying to cooperate. Unless he freezes the plan, and then we'll sit down and discuss on what could be the possibility. But I'll ask him again; if he has read the Action Plan of ex-Minister Pillay - now that we hear that he is copying the Action Plan - does he know that the Action Plan is based on the middle schools? It is not the same plan. If it is based on the middle schools, that is a different proposal altogether. I'll ask him again the question: does he agree that the star colleges in the public and private sectors have been centres of excellence?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, in all good faith, I am willing to lend my copy of the Action Plan of the previous Government to the Leader of the Opposition. That plan with which we said we agreed with the broad direction of democratisation and decentralisation provided precisely that all existing secondary schools, not only the eleven star schools or the fifteen star schools, but all would go to act as colleges. All Form I intake would be in new middle schools. That is the essence of the Action Plan, Mr Speaker and everybody knows that. That was, therefore, until September of last year the official position of the previous Government. Now, what has changed since then? I am asking again the Leader of the Opposition to tell me if we keep star schools

(mr/d10/PNQ ctd...).04

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister should answer the question.

Mr Obeegadoo: Yes, I am answering, if we keep star schools as they are, who in this House, can tell me how we abolish CPE ranking? That is why I said earlier, there are two categories of persons. There are those who fundamentally are defending the *status quo* and do not want any change, but are somehow afraid of saying so. There are those who agree there must be reform and then there is room for discussion, there is room for debate. So, if the Opposition says we must abolish CPE ranking, then it cannot logically come and say that there must be *status quo* for the star schools otherwise it will have to propose an alternative. When they were in Government there was no other alternative. Before they were in Government, the Bissoondoyal Report of 1995 showed there were no other alternatives, hence our proposals.

D10P03CO1

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, the Minister forgets to say that we did not implement the Plan precisely because there was disagreement.

(Laughter on Government side)

Precisely because there was disagreement. This is not a laughing matter! Furthermore...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker, Sir, can I ask my question? You must give me extra time.

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

(Interruptions)

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister lifted the Action Plan as if he is defending the Action Plan now! When he was in the Opposition, he was all against it. He had no proposals to make for he was all against it. I would have wished the hon. Minister to answer the question that I have asked him. Would he care, after seven minutes of more explanations, to answer the question that I have asked him?

Mr Obeegadoo: If the question relates to freezing the reform plans then we should be clear.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister has forgot the question, Mr Speaker. Let me ask him again: does the hon. Minister agree that the star colleges, be they in the public or private sectors, have been centres of excellence?

Mr Obeegadoo: The star schools both of the public and private sectors have been the best institutions in education in existence. That is why they are called star schools!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Hon. Dr. David!

Mr Obeegadoo: But these star schools cater for 1000 of 28,000 sitting the CPE. Our responsibility as a Government, my responsibility as Minister of Education, is to cater for the brightest, is to cater for students presently in the star schools, but not only for that, and that is the problem!

D10P03CO2
PNQ (contd)

The duty of the State cannot be limited to the privileged few. It must extend to each and every child of this land!

(Applause on Government side)

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister said that "the duty of the State should not be limited to the privileged few", but this is exactly what he is doing. He is succumbing to the powerful lobby of the few, because he does not have the guts or the courage to say no of what is being imposed. This is what he is doing. So, why is he talking about the "privileged few"? Now, that he has answered the question at long last, he is therefore agreeing that these colleges are the best and this is where the poor children of this country has managed to get their education. Now, what is the hidden agenda to try to destroy these very schools which he agrees have been centres of excellence?

Mr Obeegadoo: It is very simple and I have explained it.

In any one age group, each year, only 140 students get into the QEC. By uplifting the QEC into a centre of advance learning, into a Form VI college, each year, the QEC will open its doors, not to 140 but to 400 students.

(Applause on Government side)

And that reasoning, Mr Speaker, will hold for each of these 15 star schools we hope, and are doing our best, to see transformed in the very near future!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can I then ask the hon. Minister why is it not possible to continue with the construction of good secondary schools in all regions, the programme that we started after the previous Prime Minister had stopped ...

(Interruptions)

...It is a fact. Not one school has been constructed. Whether you like it or not, it is a fact, zero school has been constructed. We constructed twelve schools!

(Interruptions)

D10P03CO3
PNQ (contd)

Mr Choonee: Six schools only!

Mr Bachoo: Yes, six schools only!

(Interruptions)

Dr. Ramgoolam: Shut up, you do not know! *Zero! To pas ti même là toi!*

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Bachoo, please. The hon. Leader of the Opposition is putting the question.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can I ask the hon. Minister why he does not continue with this construction of secondary schools while, at the same time, upgrading all the schools – I think he mentioned that in his answer just now – and maintaining the star colleges in the public and private sector? What is needed is massive investment in the construction of schools, which was stopped for 13 years.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, let us be serious. We may construct schools, but as long as the so-called star schools have a Form I intake, you need a very sharp and necessarily arbitrary instrument of selection. That is the crux of the matter. You will have, year in and year out, to select 1000 students to go to the star schools. You will have to select 150 who will have a chance of getting into the QEC. How do you do that without the CPE ranking? And, as long as you have, the CPE ranking, how do you prevent the rat race imposed upon 130,000 of our school children, their parents, their teachers, year in and year out? I ask the Leader of the Opposition to answer me the question he has been unable to answer over four and a half years!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I would have thought I am the one who asked the question and he is supposed to be the one to answer.

Mr Speaker: This is what I was going to point out. I think the role has been reversed!

D10P03CO4
PNQ (contd)

Mr Duval: Mr Speaker, we agree that star schools are only star schools because the SC and HSC pass rates are better than those of the other schools. The question that the Opposition is asking is: why does not the Minister of Education devote some of his time to get in the rest of the secondary schools system – the 34 schools or whatever that are left and the additional ones that can be constructed - to become star schools on their own without having to destroy the institutions that exist already? That is the question.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, if the hon. gentleman took some time to look at the history of our education system, he would understand. It is very simple.

Mr Duval: *Arrogance!*

Mr Obeegadoo: No, I am not being arrogant! I am not! All I am saying

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Obeegadoo: All I am saying, Mr Speaker, is that a detailed look at the reality

Dr. Ramgoolam: *To passe to lé temps voyager!*

Mr Cuttaree: *(Interruptions)*

Mr Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition and hon. Cuttaree!

Mr Cuttaree: The hon. Leader of the Opposition keeps telling me that I spend my time travelling.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Minister does not have the floor!

(Interruptions)

Order! Order.

Mr Cuttaree: He is stating that I am travelling whereas he has spent Rs40 m. on travelling.

D10P03CO5
PNQ (contd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: I do not know what he is talking about!

Mr Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition!

Mr Cuttaree (*Interruptions*)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Cuttaree, would you please...?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, let us be very clear. I am not concerned with party politics. I am not.

(Interruptions)

In the past, there have been constructions of secondary schools. I do not mind by which Government! There had been attempts to set up a QEC North. There had been talk of having quality institutions. Let us take examples for girls : you have Droopnath Ramphul which is an excellent school in the North; Maurice Curé which is an excellent school in Vacoas. Do you know the reality, Mr Speaker? There are 140 places in QEC and the last girl admitted is ranked 150th. So, despite their being Maurice Curé, Droopnath Ramphul and other schools, there is still intense, merciless, abhorrent competition from age 5 to enter into the one top star school. We are in the business of democratising; we are in the business of expanding access, of breaking the bottleneck. And I state it again, let us sit down and talk. I am willing to explain to you the rationale, the logic, which is the same logic of all reports in education over the last ten years which tell us that for as long as star schools exist, you cannot abolish the rat race.

D10p04cl/1

UNREVISED

PNQ (cont'd)

Mr Duval: Mr Speaker, Sir, it seems to me that the Minister is downgrading instead of upgrading the schools. I would like to ask the Minister whether he will agree with me that the greatest injustice of all in the primary sector is that tens of thousands of children are attending below par schools all over the island, be it in towns, in rural areas and in *cités*.

(Interruptions)

These children are suffering the greatest injustice of all and they leave school after the CPE without being able to write or read. The proposed plan of the Minister of Education does not cover this at all.

Mr Obeegadoo: I disagree, Mr Speaker, Sir. Let me explain why. We have some 280 primary schools in existence. Practically, 230 belong to the State. So, the State is doing its duty of providing education throughout the land. We must do more for the primary sector. That is why we have come with the curriculum renewal proposal; that is why we are coming with the *zone d'éducation prioritaire*; that is why we are introducing new subjects in primary schools. There is a lot of work to be done there. But the problem is the bottleneck - everybody knows that; we can look at all the reports - after primary to access the secondary.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Duval, you have asked a question. You should listen to the reply.

Mr Obeegadoo: It is that bottleneck which we have to break and I would hope we had a shared understanding on that issue because it is so fundamental to the future of our children.

Cont'd...

D10p04cl/2

UNREVISED

PNQ (cont'd)

Mr Duval: I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether he has had any discussions with all the components of Government because it seems to me, at least, that the PMSD is going in exactly the opposite direction as the rest of the Government and he is asking for 100% seats to be given to the private sector.

Mr Obeegadoo: I am having and we will have discussions with everybody, including the hon. Member.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The Minister said earlier in his reply that he is maintaining a healthy dose of competition, if needed. So, he agrees that there must be a healthy dose of competition. He should not say that he does not agree with competition while at the same time he says that he agrees.

Secondly, the Minister mentioned two schools which are doing well. These are SSS Droopnath Ramphul and SSS Maurice Curé. Therefore, he is also admitting at the same time that new good schools, if constructed over a short period of time, are becoming good secondary schools. What is the difficulty in constructing good schools all over the island?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I really think the Opposition should meet with me, sit down and discuss, because clearly, despite all my efforts, I am not getting through to the Opposition. They are not being able to understand. What did I just say? I said that despite there being SSS Maurice Curé, despite there being SSS Droopnath Ramphul, despite there being a host of well perceived good secondary schools for girls, practically everyone, if given the choice, will go to QEC and QEC only. You need an instrument to distinguish students 150 from 14,000 girls attempting the CPE. That is why you have an instrument as harsh, as unjust, as arbitrary as CPE ranking. That was my point and that is the point which has led all reports to propose what we are proposing now.

Cont'd...

D10p04cl/3

UNREVISED

PNQ (cont'd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: I have a last supplementary. First of all, I will invite the Minister to come with me to the different regions where we are having meetings with the people. He will see what is their reaction. Secondly, the so-called leader of the PMSD has said that 100% seats should be given to the private schools. I would like to say two things. Firstly, the 50% reserved seats is a different question and he should not try to mix it with the issue. Secondly, we maintain that there is a public outcry and, therefore, I will ask the Minister whether he would freeze his plan and discuss with the people he had met.

Mr Obeegadoo: Let me say, first of all, that I agree entirely with the first point made by the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The question of 50% seats or whatever in private schools is a completely different issue; it has nothing to do with the reform plan and should not be brought into the debate on the reform plan. I am very happy that there is a clear understanding between the Opposition and the Government side on that issue.

Secondly, I say again that for 90% of the reforms starting with the construction of schools with all the measures that I listed earlier, there is wide consensus and it would be a crime against the country not to proceed. On the one issue of conversion of star schools into Form VI colleges, the plan has been presented only ten to 11 days ago. This is not implementable before January 2003. The debate is continuing. I am at this point in time optimistic as to developments which are and will be happening. We shall closely monitor and review the situation hopefully in discussion together as the situation evolves.
