

YEAR 2006

PRIMARY EDUCATION - SELECTION PROCESS (21/03/06)

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the proposed re-introduction of a selection process at the end of primary education that will necessitate some form of ranking, he will –

(a) state if this will have a negative impact on young students' psychological and educational development and on skills development generally, and

(b) agree to the setting up of a Select Committee chaired by the Minister of Education and Human Resources to find a way to achieve Government's targets without re-introducing such a selection process at the end of primary education.

The Minister of Education & Human Resources (Mr D. Gokhool):
Mr Speaker Sir, with your permission and as Minister responsible for the portfolio of Education, I shall reply to the PNQ of the Leader of the Opposition as it relates to education.

At the outset, I am most happy to note that the Leader of the Opposition wishes that Government achieves its targets in the field of education.

However, I beg to differ with him on the question of the supposedly negative impact which the new mode of admission to Form I will have on students, neither can I agree with the statement that a selection process is being re-introduced when, in fact, the selection process has never been abolished. The selection process exists and it has never been abolished. Mr Speaker, Sir, having said that, it is important for me to place the issues raised by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, in their proper context and perspective of the Reform Agenda of this Government as far as the education sector is concerned.

Mr Speaker Sir, as already announced and in line with the Government's Programme for 2005-2010, my Ministry is now pursuing a new vision for a World Class Quality Education accessible to all. We are bringing about a paradigm shift in our education agenda in line with modern realities.

Mr Speaker, Sir, it is important for me to point out that my Ministry

believes in a comprehensive, holistic and inclusive approach in introducing reforms on all fronts, right from pre-primary...

(Interruptions)

to secondary, from post secondary to tertiary, from pre-voc, ZEP schools to children with special needs as opposed - and hon. Members of this Assembly and the public may wish to appreciate - to a fragmented, piecemeal, ad-hoc basis...

(Interruptions)

This is what has been going on for the past few years as regards changes to our education sector...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the vision of a world class education accessible to all is in line with Government overall vision for the Mauritian society and its people.

Mr Speaker, Sir, let me remind Members of the Opposition that all actions of this Government flow from a clear societal vision that we have articulated very clearly and very convincingly in the Government Programme 2005-2010 which has been debated and voted in the National Assembly.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Government Programme has been inspired from the Electoral Manifesto of the Social Alliance which has been plebiscited by the people of Mauritius...

(Interruptions)

Unless Members of the Opposition are suffering from some amnesia, let me remind them that Government's overall vision is to create –

- (i) a society where there are opportunities for all. We have said it and we are doing it now for a more inclusive society, a society where there is equity of treatment before the law by all agencies whether public or private;
- (ii) a future that is prosperous for all and not for a few.....

(Interruptions)

where economic success will be characterised by equity.....

Mr Speaker: Order! Order! I will request the hon. Minister to address the Chair, please.

(Interruptions)

Order, I said. Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me continue.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

(Interruptions)

Hon. Members, you will have the right and opportunity to put questions later on.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me continue. A future that is prosperous for all and where economic success will be characterised by equity, ethics and social justice. Government is further....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Gokhool: Government is further committed to the guiding principle of nation building. Mr Speaker, Sir, in achieving this societal vision, I think it is important to emphasise that education has a crucial role to play. Mr Speaker, Sir, many years ago, a President of America mentioned, I quote -

“Our overall progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education.”

and we have been inspired by these words of wisdom.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in our quest for a better future for our children, the education sector has to play a pivotal role. Hence, our vision for a World Class Quality Education.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in our attempts to provide quality education accessible to all, Government has introduced a number of interdependent policy reforms which aim at bringing the young person to have a fruitful access to quality knowledge, to acquire basic skills which will enable him/her to cope with his/her personal challenges of life and that of the global competition. I would like to table a copy of the brochure which contains all the quality initiatives which my Ministry will implement together with a copy of those measures which are in the process of implementation towards our vision for a World Class Quality Education.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the concerns raised by the Leader of the Opposition as regards the psychological educational development of the children, are being addressed by the measures which we are introducing. Let me give a few examples....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have said it in this House that the problem of CPE failure is being addressed and it is now time for us to do away with a legacy of the past, that is, failure at CPE. There is no national assessment of the child in the lower primary cycle, that is, standards one to three and that is the reason why the weaknesses build into the system so that when the child reaches the CPE, the child faces a lot of difficulties and he is not able to succeed. This is being addressed. I mentioned in this very House that we are introducing a programme of following the child from Standards I to III so that the problems of numeracy and literacy are tackled by the time this child reaches Standard III. That will provide better opportunities for the child to succeed at the CPE.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we have already started working on the reform of a curriculum which is at the heart of the education system. Everyone agrees that there is a mismatch between the curriculum and the achievements of the child and what is required by the society. We are addressing that issue.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am happy that mention has been made of the measure which we have introduced – bridging the gap from pre-primary to primary where we provide a smooth transition of the child from the preprimary to the primary school. This will allow the child to be better

prepared. Mr Speaker, Sir, with regard to the....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Gokhool: With regard to the reinstatement of Form I to VI colleges, this is in our programme, we have been to the people and we have convincingly argued why we should do away with the Form VI colleges and re-introduce the Forms I to VI colleges. We have already started implementing this measure. In August last year, seven of the colleges were....

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, this is not part of the question. The Minister has to stick to the question.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

(Interruptions)

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, with your permission, what I am trying to argue is that all these measures address the issue raised....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, all I am trying to say is that the concerns expressed by the Leader of the Opposition are being adequately addressed. Besides, Mr Speaker, Sir, I wonder on what basis the Leader of Opposition has formulated his assertion....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker, Sir, let me add another point to it. The performance of our students has consistently declined over the last few years. There is evidence in the MES report. We are addressing this issue as well because our overall objective is to improve the achievement of our students. Mr Speaker, Sir, in view of the fact that all measures are being taken to improve the quality of education, to provide better opportunities for our children, I have consulted the Prime Minister and we do not believe that there is any justification for

setting up a Select Committee on the issue.

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, of course, my question was addressed to the hon. Prime Minister of this country. Can I ask why Government will not accept the basic truth that is put forward by all specialists concerned? This morning, I am sure the hon. Prime Minister and others will have taken cognizance of a document by *La Société des Professionnels en psychologie qui regroupe une trentaine de psychologues, psychothérapeutes et counsellors qualifiés* saying exactly that putting a selection process on 11-year old pupils is very bad for the psychological - not just educational - and educational development of these young kids. And the United Nations Special Committee on Children's Rights has also gone along these lines. So, can I ask why Government cannot accept this basic truth in relation to the damage that is going to be reintroduced on our young kids?

Mr Gokhool: The Leader of the Opposition is referring to psychologists who have made statements. I don't think there has been any scientific report to support what the Leader of the Opposition is saying. This is all conjecture but we are basing ourselves on hard facts. The MES report has stated in very clear terms what the problems are and we are addressing them.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have heard that there is no reintroduction of a selection process at the end of primary school at tender age of 11. When we have some 30,000 young kids going in for the CPE exams and aiming at only 1,260 seats, by whatever name we call it, this is a terrible selection process placed on these young shoulders of 11-year old students.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I think the hon. Leader of the Opposition is a little late in understanding the developments

(Interruptions)

Mr Gokhool: Since 2002 ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order! Hon. Bhagwan, please! Let the hon. Minister reply.

Mr Gokhool: I must say it again, Mr Speaker, Sir. Selection has

never been abolished. It has always been there.

The second point is that with regard to the educational panorama - I think this is what the Leader of the Opposition should try to understand further - things have been changing. There are many more opportunities which are available now, both in the public and the private sectors. In fact, in the public sector, the number of seats that will be available has increased significantly over the years. For example, in January 2007, a total of 10,800 seats will be available in the Government schools. We are improving access. We are broadening opportunities.

In the private sector, apart from the private colleges, we have the confessional schools and also there are private colleges, schools which are being set up. All this will increase the number of seats that is available. I cannot understand the concern of the Leader of the Opposition to the effect that we are going to introduce some kind of obstacles. Obstacles are there. In fact, obstacles are being removed.

Mr Bérenger: I have heard reference being made to the MES Report. Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the Minister whether he is aware that there is no such report? You have an annual Examiners' Report for the information of school teachers. It is an annual exercise and what has been pointed out in the latest edition of the annual Examiners' Report is nothing new. The problem has been pointed out repeatedly over the recent years. Therefore, it is misleading the country.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, the hon. Leader of the Opposition should not use the word 'misleading'.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I think the Leader of the Opposition is referring to the MES reports which are official documents and which deal with pedagogical issues and year in year out ...

(Interruptions)

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Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: Well, I wonder if the reports are not used to improve the achievement what else can be done with the reports! We are taking into account the reports of the MES and we are introducing measures to improve the achievements of our children. We are taking concrete measures whilst for the last three years the previous Minister has ignored those reports and he has not taken any concrete measures to

improve results.

Mr Dayal: Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to know from the hon. Minister of Education whether any study has been done in the past to show that before the reform was carried out the previous system had impacted negatively on the psychology and skills of the children taking part in the CPE exams.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have already answered this question. The Leader of the Opposition has based himself on conjecture. It is not based on any scientific report. However, my hon. colleague would like to know that what is available is concrete evidence from the MES reports that have brought home the weaknesses and the lowering of standard at the CPE over the last two years. This is available.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have got two questions. Firstly, I would like to ask the hon. Minister if he can table a copy of that particular report that he is referring to in the House. Secondly, I want to know from the hon. Minister whether the reform that is being proposed by him is not being motivated by a small group of lobbyists of rich and influential people instead of the pedagogical norms.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Member of the Opposition should do some research. The MES reports are public documents and they are on the website of the MES. Secondly, let me now say in this House that the reforms that we are bringing will help bring down those vested interests which are for the *status quo*. They do not want progress. We want every child to access good quality colleges. This is what we want and we are working towards it.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, the question of the hon. Leader of the Opposition refers to the psychological impact, and in his answer the Minister refers to a report from the MES. May I ask the hon. Minister when the MES carried out a study on the psychological impact of his proposition regarding the selection?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Member is confusing issues. I am talking about the lowering of achievements standard which has been referred to by the MES report. As regards the question set by the Leader of

the Opposition, I have said that this is not based on any scientific study. It is guess. The hon. Leader of the Opposition is guessing and he is making a statement to which I have already replied.

Miss Deerpalsing: Mr Speaker, Sir, the question is about psychological and educational development. I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether there was any concern, at any time, about psychological and educational development in the selection process of some private secondary schools continuing Form I to Form VI, there was any sensible reason for some of them to continue Form I to Form VI while same was not allowed for public schools. Where is the educational and psychological development *à deux vitesses* here?

Mr Gokhool: The fact that this Government is going back to Form I to Form VI is evidence enough. To support what the hon. Member is saying, the confessional colleges refused to go along the line proposed by the previous Minister. They refused and they were right.

Mr Dayal: Mr Speaker, Sir, as a result of the report of the MES of May 2005, has his Ministry carried out an exercise to situate exactly the causes of the decline of the standard of education, especially at CPE level?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, as I said, we are taking concrete measures to address the problems identified by the MES in its report. I have requested the MES to carry out a thorough analysis of the issues that have been raised and to organise the workshops for the teachers working in standards V and VI so that they are better equipped to deal with those problems. This is going to lead to the improvement of the achievements of the children.

Mr Guinness: It is the teachers who are going to work with these pupils. Is the Minister aware that a survey has been carried out and 77% of the teachers are against the A+ formula?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have got a copy of that so-called survey. Does the hon. Member of the Opposition know what a survey is all about? Is it based on one question? One question has been asked and it is a leading question. Of course, you can get the result that you want. I feel sorry that the Member of the Opposition is referring to such a survey. He has been a teacher. It is a shame!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Speaker: Hon. Dr. Mungur!

(Interruptions)

Order! There is no need to provoke!

Dr. Mungur: Mr Speaker, Sir ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order, please!

Dr. Mungur: Mr Speaker, Sir, among the 20 best universities, 17 are from the United States, 2 are from England, that is, from Oxford and Cambridge and one is from Japan. Can I ask the Minister whether his reform has a dose of competition compared to the heavy dose practised in all the best universities mentioned?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the issue of competition has been carefully studied by Government. Nobody would like to go for fierce competition. We want fair competition, and what we are doing, Mr Speaker, Sir, is ensuring that those children who have difficulties are provided with the support and the facilities. That is why we are revisiting the ZEP school project. We have also brought measures to deal with problems which children with special needs are facing. We are addressing the problems of pupils who have difficulties. But at the same time, Mr Speaker, Sir, can we, in a spirit of fairness and equity, prevent those children who are making more efforts from going ahead? Can we do that, Mr Speaker, Sir? This is not possible. This is why, in the reform we are bringing, we want to support those children who have difficulties, but at the same time, we want to encourage, recognise the children who are making efforts. This is the policy of the Government: to provide quality education to all our children.

Mr Cuttaree: Mr Speaker, Sir, the main contention of the Opposition is that the competition should not be at the age of 11, but later on. This is the issue we are dealing with. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has cited many people who have said that this selection at 11 is bad. The hon. Minister, to support his argumentation, has said that there is a report. He talks about the report of the MES to the applause of the Government side. Can I ask the hon. Minister whether he would lay on the Table of the Assembly "the report"? My small understanding of English tells me that

“the report” is a particular report.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have just answered the question put by the hon. Member of the Opposition. The MES studies the performance and achievements of pupils at CPE and they regularly identify the weaknesses that have to be remedied. This is what we need to do in order to improve the achievements of pupils.

Secondly, Mr Speaker, Sir, I think the hon. Member is again raising the issue of competition. I have already answered that opportunities are being increased and it is also a matter for parents because in this modern era parents are very concerned about the welfare and education of their children. So, parents, perhaps, should be given the opportunity to decide what is best for them. And this is the opportunity we are giving to parents.

Mr Bérenger: In fact, my question is again to the Prime Minister of this country.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order, please!

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the Prime Minister whether he realises what is being proposed is worse than the previous ranking system? Because what is being proposed now is ranking without transparency. This will not work and it will create an explosive situation in the country; and that is why I appeal to the hon. Prime Minister that we should review this idea of reintroducing a selection process at the age of 11, and, in fact, re-introducing ranking without transparency. This is a recipe for catastrophe.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, again let me say it that we are not introducing ranking. The grading system is being used and the Leader of the Opposition should do his homework. We are keeping to grading. The second point, Mr Speaker, Sir, we should never do anything to criticise or make allegation towards institutions which have been doing their work for many years. The MES has been ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, on a point of order. What allegation am I supposed to have made concerning the MES?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, when the Leader of the Opposition is talking about transparency, has he got some doubts about the issue of transparency by the MES?

Mr Bérenger: The hon. Minister said that I had made an allegation, can I request the Chair to request the Minister to withdraw that. I have made no allegation against the MES.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order! Order! The Leader of the Opposition raised the issue of transparency. The Minister should answer on this, please.

Mr Gokhool: I am answering on the issue of transparency, Mr Speaker, Sir. Currently, it is the MES, within the given parameters, that carries out the selection. We have set the parameters, and the MES will do the work as it has been doing.

Mr Speaker: Time is over! Questions addressed to the hon. Prime Minister!

(Interruptions)

I have got an announcement. The Table has been informed that PQs B/52 and B/53 respectively, addressed to the hon. Attorney- General, Minister of Justice & Human Rights, will now be replied by Dr. the hon. Prime Minister. Consequently, time permitting, these PQs will be answered after PQ B/18. I have also been informed that PQs B/13 and B/14 have been withdrawn.