

18th March 2003 Daily News

Some reflections on policy-making in education

by Eric J. de Silva

Extracts of the Thirteenth J. E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture, 14 February 2003.

It is an honour and a privilege for me to deliver the 13th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture. In an appreciation I wrote to the newspapers on Prof. Jayasuriya's 83rd birthday, I described him as "Sri Lanka's educationist of the 20th century". Prof. J. E. Jayasuriya's varied achievements, and the contribution he made to education in this country are only too well-known to bear repetition on this occasion.

Not only did he stand out as our most distinguished and widely acclaimed educationist, he was also known as the father of population education in the Asian region.

This was due to the pioneering work he did as Regional Adviser in Population Education attached to the Unesco Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

The Youth Commission, appointed in 1989 to go into the causes of youth unrest, underlined the need to have national policies in areas that transcended party politics. Education was identified as one such area. A national policy, explained the Commission, "is not an inflexible policy, but one which will be liable to necessary alteration as changed circumstances may require, and as determined through national consensus, but not a policy to be affected by the vagaries of transient political majorities". The Youth Commission recommended that a National Commission on Education Policy be established "which would aim at achieving a consensus with regard to educational policy."

The government accepted this proposal and placed before Parliament a bill to establish a National Education Commission. At the second reading debate on the bill that took place on March 5, 1991, Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali who steered the bill through Parliament as the Minister of Education and Higher Education, described it as "one of the most important bills in the history of education in this country".

He described the proposed National Education Commission as the "instrument by which stability could be restored to the system". The bill received the support of the opposition and was passed without a division, indicating that a consensus had been reached across the political divide on the need for a

consensus on education policy. It became law as the National Education Commission Act No. 19 of 1991, and the National Education Commission (NEC) was appointed in July 1991. It is significant that the government (through the Minister) sought the concurrence of the Leader of the Opposition for the persons picked for appointment as members of the Commission. This was readily given in the same spirit as it was sought.

There are a few provisions of the NEC Act that I wish to draw your special attention to, namely

Section 2 (1), which said that the President may declare from time to time the National Education Policy, which all authorities and institutions responsible for education had to conform to; Section 2(3), which said that the National Education Policy shall be formulated on a consideration of the recommendations and advice made to the President by the National Education Commission;

Section 8 (1), which required the Commission to make recommendations to the President on educational policy in all its aspects, with a view to, ensuring continuity in educational policy and enabling the education system to respond to changing needs in society.

A reference was made in this Section to a comprehensive National Education Policy;

Section 9, which safeguarded the powers of the Minister subject, however, to the National Education Policy declared under section 2 (1). This provision, by implication, meant that the Minister would not be able to make ad hoc policy decisions that went counter to declared policy.

It would, thus, be seen that the NEC Act gave the concept of a national education policy a specific legal meaning. It no longer meant the education policy that the ruling party or the government in power thinks is good for the nation. This is important for us to remember.

Sri Lanka's socio-economic and educational landscape had, in the meantime, changed dramatically. We were no longer living in the 1940s, or for that matter, in the 1970s. We had entirely new challenges to face. Our education policies had to take note of the changes that had taken place around us, and were still taking place at a phenomenal pace. We had two options, either be left behind clinging onto our old fixations, or move ahead with the changing times. It is the



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latter option that most countries had chosen. We had to do likewise.

The NEC submitted an interim report to the President in May 1992, which was published as The First Report of the National Education Commission, indicating obviously that other reports were to follow. This report was a great disappointment from the point of view of at least identifying, if not dealing with, the fundamental issues on which a consensus had to be arrived at.

The "priorities for action" identified by the Commission did not include any of the core issues we had to deal with, at least for further study and public debate.

There were other important matters too that had to be discussed, debated and decisions taken on, in any serious attempt at formulating a National Education Policy.

There was, for instance, the whole question of upgrading of schools which was being done in a most ad hoc manner, in the absence of a national policy. The need to depoliticise teacher recruitment and teacher deployment (transfers, in particular) was another important matter.

Then, there was the integrated curriculum in social studies and science, in vogue since the reforms of 1972, which had come in for considerable criticism. But these were conspicuous by their absence in the NEC's list of priorities.

Some of the things listed were the number of school days, the post of deputy principal and the education clerical service, and the only matter the NEC identified for further public debate and study was a professional body for teachers! While it

would be reasonable to say that these were unimportant, they were, surely, not the issues for which we needed to have a permanent National Education Commission.

There were no more reports from the NEC in the years that followed. Since President Premadasa himself held the portfolio of Education and Higher Education from August, 1991 until his death in May, 1993, one wonders whether he lost interest in the formulation of a National Education Policy, and put the NEC in cold storage. The Opposition too remained totally apathetic. In any other country, there would have been a public outcry to find out what was happening to the much-awaited national education policy.

Leave aside the general public, even the country's intelligentsia showed no interest in the matter. We lacked people like JEJ to raise their voice.

In the meantime, ad hoc policy decisions continued to be taken, decisions that sometimes committed the exchequer to the expenditure of billions of rupees.

In this autobiographical work 'In Pursuit of Governance', Mr. M. D. D. Pieris, Secretary to the Ministry at the time, describes graphically and in great detail how President Premadasa, while occupying his seat on the stage at the free school book distribution ceremony held in Polonnaruwa on January 20, 1992 suddenly called him from where he was seated at the back of the stage and told him "I want to give free school uniforms to the children from next year" completely stunning him.

Thereafter having got Mr. Pieris to quickly work out the financial

implications on a borrowed calculator without the help of his spectacles, which he had unfortunately left behind at home, the President announced the decision during his speech to the vast cheers of the crowd! This would not have been possible if we had an agreed national policy on subsidies on education, based on what the resources of the country permit. Mr. Pieris' description provides an excellent case study of how policy making in education takes place in this country, and is recommended reading for anyone interested in the subject. (Pieris, 2002)

Interest in a National Education Policy revived only with the change of government in 1994.

The new government made the formulation of a National Education Policy one of its main priorities. The President and the Minister of Education and Higher Education made numerous pronouncements to this effect. They often pointed out that they kept the composition of the NEC unchanged in order to ensure continuity in the formulation of the National Education policy. With the adoption of open economic policies by the People's Alliance government, a substantial area of policy convergence had emerged between the two main parties or contending political forces in this country, for the very first time. This provided a unique opportunity for the NEC to edge them forward towards reaching a consensus on education policy.

In September 1995, the NEC submitted to the President a document under the title 'An Action Oriented Strategy Towards a National Education Policy' (referred to hereafter as the Strategy Towards a Policy or STP document, for convenience). In its introduction, NEC reiterated the fact that it had been "entrusted with the responsibility of making recommendations on educational policy in all its aspects enabling the education system to respond to changing needs in society" (my emphasis).

This is precisely what the NEC failed to do in this document. Following are the aspects of the education system that NEC identified as needing reform:

- (a) Curricula and evaluation
- (b) Structure
- (c) Pupils and students
- (d) Teachers
- (e) Supporting personnel
- (f) Parental contribution
- (g) Other participants

in the educational process

- (h) Resources, services and infrastructure
- (i) Governance
- (j) Time-frames

The STP document showed that the NEC had, for a second time, fought shy of coming to grips with the more critical and controversial issues in education, without reaching a consensus on which a NEP was a pure dream. The three core issues of the state's role in education, free education and the medium of instruction were disposed of in three brief sentences in this document as follows:

"The state will play the major role in providing resources for general education. General education up to the first degree level will be provided free. Education will be compulsory to all children of schooling age up to the age of 14 years; and will be made accessible to all with a freedom of choice of medium of instruction between the two national languages, Sinhala and Tamil."

Were these not matters to be studied in greater depth and the available policy options more carefully examined? Or were they considered sacred cows not to be touched? Dr. Tara de Mel, who was Vice Chairperson of the NEC later on, provides us with the answer. She says her experience as a participant in the policy making process while in the National Education Commission and in the Ministry taught her that "any change that seemed controversial was best left untouched, if one was to be popular". "Therefore", she adds, "it was no surprise that introducing English medium education, like certain other critical policy initiatives, was left untouched" (de Mel, 2002). We saw that the need for a NEC was to deal with the very issues that politicians dreaded to touch for fear of becoming unpopular, but it appears that the NEC too had caught the same infection!

To cut a long story short, the Strategy Towards a Policy document marked the end of the journey that we had so enthusiastically commenced in 1991. The long march towards a National Education Policy had ended unproductively, and the concept of an education policy that transcended party politics, was laid to rest.

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(To be continued)