

13th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture on February 14

Some reflections on policy making in education

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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.

I met Prof. Jayasuriya for the first time, at a meeting convened by UNESCO in Bangkok in 1981. He returned to Sri Lanka in mid 1982, around the time I left the Ministry of Education to take charge of the UNESCO Project for Quality Improvement of General Education. He gladly accepted my invitation to work with the project as consultant for a short period, and help in its initial planning. He did so because he found the project's work to be in an area in which he had a lifetime interest. It was not for reasons of remuneration, which, I know, went entirely to charity. The advice and support he gave me in getting the project off the ground and charting out its future directions was invaluable. These few months marked the beginning of an association that developed into a close personal friendship between us, which lasted until his death. We used to meet quite frequently and discuss various problems and issues pertaining to education. These discussions were extremely stimulating, and a great learning experience for me. For this reason too, I am glad to have got the opportunity of speaking in his honour.

The quality I admired most in Prof. Jayasuriya was his forthrightness, and fearless advocacy of the causes he believed in. Those who have read his writings or associated with him will agree that this was a quality that stood out in him. There were no holds-barred when he wanted to give expression to his convictions. He never hesitated to call a spade anything but a spade. Neither the fear of treading on the corns of those in power nor personal friendships could hold him back. Let me give two illustrations.

When the White Paper of 1964 departed from the recommendations of the National Education Commission which he chaired in 1960/61 on "some vital and crucial issues", he did not remain silent. He came out with a detailed criticism of the government's proposals. In his concluding remarks, he said: "It was the purpose of this analysis to examine the implications of the proposals for education in the White Paper, especially the implications that are hidden in a sugar-coating of facile phraseology and to focus attention on the limitations of the proposals from the point of view of planning a rational system of education"

He spared neither politician nor bureaucrat in his writings. "The people who achieve positions of leadership," he once said, "are distinguished by their demagoguery and not by any capacity to work out reasoned solutions to national problems. They depend heavily on bureaucratic officials, who have reached the top rungs of the

administrative hierarchy by their consummate skill in tinkering with problems, maintaining the status quo, and attempting nothing unhallowed by long tradition. Unimaginatively grooved in their own thinking, they are unappreciative that any wisdom could exist outside their own ranks".

With these comments as a backdrop, let me proceed to the subject that I have chosen to speak on, namely, policy making in education. This was a subject, which was dear to the heart of Prof. Jayasuriya. In dealing with it, I will strive to emulate him to the best of my ability, and, like he did, call a spade nothing but a spade. That, I think, is the greatest honour we can bestow on the remarkable man, in whose memory we have assembled at this memorial lecture. That, also, is the greatest contribution

them before the Board of Ministers. Kannangara, as Minister of Education, moved the resolution in the State Council on May 30, 1944. The debate on the resolution, which commenced in July 1944, took 15 full days and concluded nearly a year later. The intervening period saw the continuance of the public debate that had already commenced with the publication of the special committee report. The resolution was finally passed in the State Council in June 1945 with many amendments.

Thus the special committee proposals went through a filtering process in its passage through the Executive Committee, the Board of Ministers and the State Council, in addition to the public discussion that the proposals generated. Although, as a consequence, some of the special committee

could take a decision on the proposals. The new government, which assumed office in 1965, came up with its own White Paper in September 1966. These proposals too came under close public scrutiny. 'Asadharana nava adhyapana yojana' was the title of an article by JEJ, which appeared in the *Lankadeepa* of December 2, 1966. The White Paper was debated in parliament for two whole days, and a draft Bill presented in parliament one year later. The proposals contained in the White Paper and the Bill created such a furore that the government was compelled to shelve the proposals. Thus, the journey that began in the 1940s to set up a national system of education remained unfinished. It was clear, by this time, that policy making in education was getting increasingly enmeshed in the web of political party rivalry.

The Seventies and the Eighties

The education reforms of 1972 signified a departure from practices hitherto followed in policy making in education. The country had exploded in a violent insurrection of unprecedented proportions. The country's education system had to be re-directed along new lines, along with major (one might even say, revolutionary) changes in other sectors. The response, it was felt, had to be quick. There was no time for White Papers, or long drawn-out public debates and discussions. A major overhaul of education was undertaken in great haste with, of course, the attendant repercussions. The reforms came in for considerable criticism from parents, teachers and the general public, after implementation commenced. One of the main architects of these reforms, was to admit later that "the reforms were too quick". He added: "We should have discussed these changes more fully before implementing them. We could have better prepared parents for the changes. A slower rate of change would have also prevented the logistical problems we got into" (Udagama, 1992). The reforms became a hot political issue during the period leading to the general election of 1977. The main opposition party pledged to do away with the more controversial reforms, during its election campaign. This it did on being elected to power, and a generation of students got trapped in between the changes.

In 1981, the government reverted to the practice of placing before the public its reform proposals in the form of a White Paper. As Dr. Premadasa Udagama points out, "the publication of a White Paper or any document on reforms in education is a valid democratic process for the people to debate on the issues raised in the document." (Udagama, 1999). In its introduction, the White Paper explicitly said the proposals were "for public debate and discussion in legislature". Yet, it got trapped in the political act that we had by now learnt to stage with consummate skill! The ruling party, while being in the opposition, had exploited public disaffection with the 1972 reforms to gain political advantage, and now it was their opponents' turn. The White Paper became the red rag for mounting a frontal attack on the government, with radical youth providing muscle to the campaign. Street demonstrations overshadowed other more restrained and studied forms of dissent. The White Paper both metaphorically and literally went up in flames. Even school children who did not have even an inkling of what the White Paper contained were pulled out of their classes to voice their opposition to it.

The 1981 White Paper both metaphorically and literally went up in flames. Even school children who did not have even an inkling of what it contained were pulled out of their classes to voice their opposition. With a general election not too faraway, MPs got cold feet and pressurised President Jayewardene to shelve the White Paper... This is where we stood after four decades of policy making in education. It took a second youth insurrection to make us open our eyes to the stark reality that this cannot go on.

we can make to improve the quality of policy making in education in this country.

Early attempts at policy making

Our earliest attempt at policy making in education for independent Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known then) goes back to the Special Committee on Education (1940), chaired by C.W.W. Kannangara. We were on the threshold of achieving independence at the time, and the special committee's task was to formulate a national system of education, which was the need for a country emerging out of centuries of colonial rule.

The special committee took about three years to submit its recommendations. Its report was debated widely in the press, in the State Council and in other forums. In the public debate that followed, views were expressed in support of as well as against the special committee proposals. While some felt that the proposals were too radical, others felt that the proposals did not go far enough. Dr. N. M. Perera, for instance, belonged to the second category. The well-known booklet that he wrote while under detention in the Bogambara prison shows how strongly worded some of the criticisms were. He castigated the special committee for blindly and slavishly proceeding to apply to Ceylon a plan drawn up for a different country with a different ideology. He accused the special committee of "cribbing the senior school idea direct from the Spens report" of England, which was, indeed, true. Dr. Perera went on to say: "The net result is a mess that makes a veritable hotch-potch of its own fundamental dish of free education. It is a sad commentary on our past system of education that those who pose as major educationists are incapable of independent thought".

The special committee recommendations went before the Executive Committee on Education, which accepted them with a few modifications and placed

proposals failed to gain acceptance, the policy making process that its report set in motion was clearly transparent. It was carried out in the open at a time when the word transparency was hardly in use with reference to policy making or, for that matter, governance. As toddlers in democratic governance, we had been quick to grasp two vital elements of the policy making process in a democracy, namely, (a) taking the public into confidence and (b) adhering to due processes and constitutional procedures in making public policy.

After the country gained its independence, the D.S. Senanayake government reviewed the policies that had been adopted during the preceding years, and placed before the public its proposals for educational reform in the form of a White Paper (Government Proposals for Educational Reform in Ceylon), adopting the British practice. A number of changes were made in the government's proposals in the light of the debate that followed both within and outside parliament, and these were incorporated in the Education (Amendment) Act No. 5 of 1951. Thus, openness and public discussion were essential features of policy making in those early days.

With the decision to take-over assisted schools by the state in 1961, the emphasis shifted from establishing a national system of education to establishing a unified national system of education. This would be clear from the terms of reference of the J.E. Jayasuriya Commission appointed in that year. A unified national system of education meant a system under public control and management, which Kannangara had espoused, and had failed to get through the special committee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that the Government's White Paper of 1964 departed from the recommendations of the Jayasuriya Commission. Although the White Paper was tabled in parliament, the government was defeated before it

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