

Education ministry duplicity

by Rajiva Wijesinha

I was much amused by the missive from the Ministry of Education which purported to be a response to my article entitled 'Killing English'. The article was not signed, unlike the one sent in about a year back. This one referred to a 'mess created' by me, though the last article emphasized that my 'honesty, integrity and capability' were not in question. I am therefore constrained to respond. Last time I contented myself with a brief note to the Minister, to point out a few errors of fact in the article but to thank him for having confirmed my integrity. My original comments had after all been spawned by various newspaper reports claiming the Ministry had accused me of fraud, though over the telephone the Minister was kind enough to say he was not referring to me.

Needless to say the Minister has never acknowledged, let alone responded in writing, to any of the letters I have sent him regarding this Project. In this he is quite unlike his peers, from the Prime Minister down to young Mr. Hashim, who at least understand the conventions even though action is often beyond them. It is necessary to say this because the Ministry missive implies that I write to the papers to create trouble. If any of my concerns had been addressed over the last year and a half there would have been no need to write to the papers.

And far from my writings demotivating people, I have brought to the attention of the Minister the comments of a number of Principals and Teachers who ring me at all hours of the day and night to find out what is happening. As I pointed out to him in a recent letter, he and his officials are paid to do a job, whereas I have been working totally on an honorary basis since July 2002 on the Grade 7 English Medium materials.

Alternative plans

When the Ministry failed to pay its dues for several months in the middle of 2002, which meant no work could be done on the Project - since no one else working on the Project could be expected to work without remuneration - I suggested they find someone else to do the work. However, instead of making alternative plans, they came back to me in October and requested me to resume work. Mr. Medagama, whom I have described as about the only professional left in a senior position at the Ministry, in fact engaged in what can only be described as emotional blackmail, in telling me that it was the children who would suffer otherwise. Mrs. Hettiarachchi, the Team Leader, said the same, and because these are two people I respect - and because it was clear that nothing had been done, and the children would indeed suffer - I agreed.

I made a few conditions, one of which was that I would not have to step into the Ministry again. Another was that due cheques would be delivered promptly to my house or Mrs. Hettiarachchi's. This was agreed at a meeting on October 2nd. On the 3rd the cheque was delivered to my house by the Director English, which allowed my team to be paid, and resume work. So much for all the nonsense the Ministry talks about audit queries preventing them from paying.

In this regard it should be pointed out that the Accountant from the GEP 2 Project Office at the Ministry, which handles the disbursement of funds, came to see me on March 11th this year, to seek my assistance with answering the queries, which had been forwarded at that time. All the panic the previous year was simply gossip on the part of those in the Ministry who wanted to stymie the Project.

The Audit Queries were largely trivialities, the most important - which had panicked the poor Minister when the gossip reached him, which is what led to the Press Conference in August 2002 which prompted the allegations against me - was that the National Anthem had been omitted. Since the English Association had been contracted to translate the material, it was up to the Ministry to point out the need to include the National Anthem if that was mandatory. After all there have been school texts published by the NIE which leave out the National Anthem. How is a purely academic body meant to know what is essential if EPD - which was shown the texts before publication - does not advise? My response to the Audit Queries pointed out that the previous Minister also included some of his own very jolly poetry in the texts, and perhaps the Ministry would have instructed that these too should be translated.

So much for that nonsense. The Director of the GEP 2 Project sent me a very nice thank you for my answers - the only thanks I have received from the Ministry in the last eighteen months - and I have heard nothing of Audit Queries since.

Although it could only resume work in October 2002, the English Association sent out the materials for Grade 6 by the end of November and handed over the diskettes to the Ministry so that it could produce books for students commencing Grade 6 in 2003. EASL then finished the Social Studies book for Grade 7 and dispatched it to schools in the first week of the new term in 2003. The first set of Science materials was sent the following week, and the second set before the end of February.

It is therefore a downright lie when the anonymous Ministry spokesman writes of 'The delay in getting grade seven books printed' because there was no delay up to that stage. The delay was in getting the Grade 6 books out. Though we had given the Ministry the diskettes in November 2002, the books were only sent out at the very end of the first term.

In January we were told that there were blanks instead of pictures, which suggested the Ministry had not bothered to open the diskettes since November. We had in fact told them of some slight editing that was necessary, in particular the substitution of 'Prime Numbers' for 'Primary Numbers' but clearly this had been ignored. It also transpired that the absence of pictures was because the Ministry used an inferior computer. I believe Mrs. Hettiarachchi explained this in words of one syllable to the Minister, who for once acted promptly. The Director of the Educational Publications Dept, that wonderfully efficient entity according to the Ministry missive, rang Mrs. Hettiarachchi up to admit that all was indeed well with the diskettes EASL had supplied.

It should be noted therefore that the attempt of the Addl. Director now in charge of the Project, at the meeting held at President's House when several Principals complained of delay with regard to the Grade 6 books, to blame the English Association on the grounds that the diskettes had to be edited, was a barefaced lie. She knows perfectly well that replacing 'Primary' with 'Prime' takes just a few minutes with a computer. She

also knows that the Ministry did not bother to check the diskettes for three months. She also knows that there was nothing wrong with the Health and Environment books, which were sent out in March, while the Maths book actually went out in April or later, long after schools had closed.

Unfortunately lying seems to have become endemic at the Ministry. The lady claimed, in response to worries about whether material for Grade 8 would be ready by the beginning of next year, that this had already been translated. She added that, since the Ministry was dissatisfied with the EASL adaptations for Grade 7, they had also finished translating those again. However a friend of mine who visited EPD on that very day said that the Director told him that it was only the Social Studies book that was completed. A board charting progress in the Director's office seemed to bear this out, and the impression he had was that work had barely started on Grade 8, which is of course the urgency. I should add that I was not present at this meeting myself, but on inductive grounds I think my friend is more credible than Ms. Kariyawasam, hard-working and dedicated though she usually is.

To return to the Grade 7 books - the funds sent by the Ministry upto the beginning of 2002 were not sufficient to print the second set of the Science materials and to courier them to schools. The Treasurer of EASL however agreed to loan funds on my assurance that the Ministry had pledged to deliver cheques promptly. In March the request for the next tranche due was sent to

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the Ministry together with all accounts and copies of receipts. This included, at the request of the Ministry which had agreed to refund that expenditure too, details of the extra books printed (the original contract had been for 4000 copies of books but, with the expansion of the Project, 7000 and then 8000 had had to be printed).

The request in March then was for just over Rs 1,100,000. The contract the Ministry had prepared specified that dues should be paid within a month unless there are any queries. There were no queries for several months, but only verbal promises of prompt payment. There was nothing in writing until the end of June when EASL got a letter claiming that nothing could be paid because there were discrepancies between the numbers of books EASL claimed it had sent, and what it was claimed Principals said they had received.

A cursory glance at the figures suggested that Principals had indicated the number of students in classes, whereas EASL had of course despatched parcels, which contain round figures. A call to Mr. Medagama revealed that these statistics had been produced by an official at the Ministry whom I had reported for fraud while I was there (needless to say nothing was done

about that, and the lady has emerged as a UNP stalwart and been promoted since).

I told Mr. Medagama that EASL would have to stop work on the Project, since even if the Ministry figures were accurate - which they obviously were not - the Ministry should at least have paid its dues regarding the 4000 books originally contracted for. Mr. Medagama indeed told me that the Minister had suggested paying for all the books which even the statistics the Ministry possessed revealed had been sent. This amounted to near 7000, but this was another instance in which the Minister was ignored.

Mr. Medagama must have realized that my patience was being exhausted, because that evening a cheque was delivered and we were able to go ahead with printing the third set of Science materials. However, since this was based on the original 4000, I could print only that number, which means books have been distributed at the rate of one to every two students. Richer students can of course photocopy, but it seems that no one in the Ministry cares about the poorer students who cannot do this.

I checked with Principals at the meeting held at President's House, and of course it transpired that many had thought the form required them to enter the number of students in class. Incidentally the form had been distributed well after the Ministry claim of a discrepancy, and it seems that that June claim was based on some ad hoc survey. That it was palpably false was apparent from the fact that, according to the courier's receipts, schools that were said not to have received books had signed for parcels while one school which was said to have received 17 had signed for 6 parcels. Interestingly, the Principal of St. Patrick's College Jaffna, who was kind enough to thank me personally at the meeting, had a letter in which he acknowledged receipts of books in the first term, whereas the Ministry letter claimed St. Patrick's had received none.

I have dealt at length with one issue, but I should mention another that came up on the very day the Ministry missive appeared. I was talking to a teacher from Nugawela Central, which had been one of the most successful schools to undertake the programme back in 2002. She told me it was dying, because they had been told that English teachers would not be trained, and their school did not have enough subject teachers proficient in English. What I had suggested long ago was establishing teams where English teachers and subject teachers reinforced each other, with the understanding that, as students progressed upward, subject teachers would take on more and more of the teaching, since more and more technicalities were involved.

But the current dogmatic approach, that does not build on the strengths that exist in each school, is precisely what will stymie the programme in all but the most fortunate schools. The missive refers to a circular which 'could have been better worded'. That circumlocution conceals the fact that the Ministry has been issuing circulars and laying down regulations that are ill thought out and contrary to the purposes of the programmes that have been launched. Training of course has only recommenced recently. Eighteen months have in effect been wasted.

There is much else to say, but having I hope cleared my name of incompetence (which I have never been accused of before) I will refrain from going into other issues. Readers will have realized that most of the Ministry missive is unsubstantiated innuendo, though certainly not meaningless since it is designed to suggest that I am inefficient and irresponsible. I think Principals and teachers around the country know this is not the case. At the risk of sounding pompous, to quote from a letter I received from one Principal after the meeting at President's House - 'It is so heartening to know that someone like you is totally involved in this project in spite of your other important assignments and demand on your time.'

Pseudo consultants

But I think the best tribute to me was paid by the Ministry itself. The missive complains about the 'pseudo consultants who have suddenly surfaced in Colombo after the announcement of large packages of aid to Sri Lanka'. The missive does not mention that this was in response to an advertisement placed by the Ministry offering 14 Consultant positions to handle the work that I did entirely by myself (and on a part time basis) when I was working at the Ministry between 2001 and 2002. The Minister told me that he had realized this was a waste, and had put a stop to it. But he should remember that it was the Ministry that placed the advertisement.

Several people, including what the missive describes as 'International Business Houses' suggested I apply or at least allow my name to be included in their bids as a Consultant. I refused categorically. I started this Project as an ideal, not a business, because I believe passionately in English medium education for as wide a segment of society as possible. Indeed when Dr. Tara de Mel asked me to work for her, I said I would do so only on condition that we extended the opportunity to educational zones all over the country. She believed in the concept too, stuck by her word in every respect, and performed wonders in getting work even out of those in the Ministry who had long ceased to understand the meaning of the word.

Working for her was a pleasure, and during her tenure much was achieved, in English as well as in several other fields, all of which she managed with a tact and commitment that is rare in our public service. But I am afraid that all that is being destroyed. The missive suggests I have informants who tell me what is wrong in the Ministry, but this is common talk all over the place, not least from the Prime Minister himself, who certainly does not treat as confidential his view that education is in a mess.

He told me that the only person he could trust to put it right, apart from himself, was his former Permanent Secretary, Eric de Silva. That very able man has at last allowed himself to be persuaded to take on the position of Chairman of the Steering Committee on the subject. But I fear the Committee has a great many of the usual suspects, and was created without bipartisan consultation though Eric was hoping otherwise. Even for a man of his capabilities, it is too little too late. And that is why I have to respond to the Principal that, while I will try to finish the Grade 7 books if the Ministry settles its bills, I shall dissociate myself from all this as soon as possible. The mess simply makes one want to cry, and I am too old to allow myself to suffer vicariously.