

A CHALLENGE TO THE NATION: The Fijian Education Problem*

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In his speech at the Queen Victoria School Silver Jubilee on Saturday, 14th October, the Governor-General, Ratu George Cakobau, provided an interesting historical perspective on the question of the slow progress obtained in Fijian academic achievement. He said that the problem was evident 25 years ago in a speech by Sir Brian Freeston, when he laid the foundation stone of QVS in 1950. An examination of the education components of the three development plans of this country, the DP5 (1965-1970), DP6 (1971-1975) and the current DP7 (1976-1980), reveals also the continuing concern of our Governments — both colonial and post-colonial — with Fijian education.

When we examine these three development plans, we see in all of them special sections devoted to Fijian education. In these sections of the plans, the objective of producing sufficient qualified Fijians to occupy 'a due share' of top and middle level positions in the public and private sections of the economy is stressed. It is not always made clear, however, what this 'due share' of Fijian positions is or should be, whether it should be related to the proportion of Fijians in the whole population which is currently 44% (according to the 1976 Census) or whether it should be based on the 50:50 policy used in university scholarship allocation by the Government. Whatever the exact proportion of Fijians envisaged in this objective, it is fairly clear that nothing short of a substantial share of these positions is expected as the ultimate target. The above development plans emphasize the role of education in ensuring that sufficient Fijians get through the school system in order to get to these positions.

The realization that the Fijian is not achieving well academically is not new. As our Governor-General said recently, the matter has been evident for quite some time. The previous colonial Government had identified the problem and recommended certain specific steps to improve it as could be seen in the Development Plan 5 of 1965-1970. The present Government has reiterated many similar policies in both its plans. Two notable steps taken by the present government with respect of this problem have been (i) the establishment of a number of junior secondary schools in the rural areas to cater for rural dwellers most of whom are Fijians and (ii) the allocation of

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tertiary scholarships on a 50:50 racial basis to encourage all deserving Fijians to get higher education.

A lot of other specific 'affirmative actions' had also been recommended from 1960 onwards, such as the need for boarding facilities, the need for frequent inspection of schools, the amalgamation of schools in rural areas to allow for sharing of facilities, and so forth. The yearly reports of the Ministry of Education in the last decade or so are full of such suggestions.

Fiji is now in the eighth year of its independence and yet the so-called Fijian problem is still very much in evidence. In fact it seems to be looming larger and has a habit of getting into the headlines. One could ask: Have we not made improvements in view of all these policies, development plans, annual reports and a royal commission, that have all attempted to deal with this problem?

The evidence suggests that in terms of academic achievements in external examinations, the situation has not improved. The results of the Secondary Entrance Examination, for example, have not shown any improvement in the proportion of Fijians relative to other races passing the examination. Since 1970, the proportion of Fijians passing this examination averages about 35%. The proportion of Fijians passing the Fiji Junior Certificate and the New Zealand School Certificate has also not shown any improvement. The Fijian pass rate for the University Entrance Examination is equally disturbing. Whereas in 1965, 20% of all those who passed this examination were Fijians, the average proportion of Fijians passing the same examination since 1970 is only about 18%.

These results indicate a very high dropout rate of Fijians at the secondary level, particularly after Form 4. At this level, the proportion of Fijians passing the Fiji Junior Examination is about 11% less than the relative proportion of Fijians in the general population. In the New Zealand University Entrance taken at Form 6, this figure soars to 26%. The above figures indicate that the Fijian child has comparatively little chance of getting through to higher secondary let alone the tertiary level. Certainly, his chances are less than those of his contemporaries. In effect, his chance of getting to Form 6 is three to four times less than that of an Indian child and six times less than that of a Chinese or Part-European. These figures do not indicate any change for the better despite the number of measures suggested and implemented to improve Fijian education.

These figures, of course, do not give the full story. There may be other benefits to the Fijians which have not been considered but in view of the importance of examination results in determining those who pursue tertiary education or those who take up other important positions in the country, they cannot therefore be completely ignored. It could also be said that some wastage is inevitable in any educational system but the occurrence of dis-

proportional dropouts where the proportions of the major populations are nearly equal creates some unpleasant feelings, and we are not unfamiliar with this situation in this country.

There is the danger of over-reacting to such a situation and resorting to short-term measures which instead of alleviating the situation bring about new problems. An example of such a measure is the 50:50 racial policy of allocating scholarships to students at the Foundation year of the University. This policy states that the number of allocated scholarship places for Fijians should be equal to the number of places allocated to all the other ethnic groups put together. In practice, this means that 50% of the places are given to the 18% of the Fijians passing the University Entrance and 50% to the other 82% of pupils from all the other ethnic groups who pass the same examination.

Given such disproportional results in the New Zealand University Entrance Examination, the policy encourages the selection of students from differential achievement groups after which they are placed in a common programme where there are expected to do equally well. As expected, the number of Fijians failing at the University Preliminary II or Foundation level is much greater than the students from the other ethnic groups. In 1977, for example, the overall failure rate of Fijians at this level was four times greater than that of non-Fijians.

This policy inevitably produces a high failure rate and is wasteful of resources. In addition, it creates a tradition of failure and lack of confidence among Fijians which could, for some, develop into deep-seated complexes. This policy has also received its fair share of opposition from other members of the community because of its blatant discriminating posture. In any multi-ethnic community, the acceptance of any measure of affirmative action usually depends on the goodwill of other members of the community, a commodity which is not always inexhaustible, and which, if eroded or lost, could hardly be regained. It seems reasonable therefore to expect from those to whom such goodwill is extended, that they vigilantly nurture it and guard against its abuse. In our situation, this means that the Fijians must see it unworthy of themselves to endorse and accept short-term policies that in themselves are blatantly discriminating in their favour. On the surface their non-acceptance of such policy may seem a path to 'quick death' but it is contended here that it would not be so. Once such a gesture is made, it would then become the task of the nation to seek and pursue other viable long-term policies that are worthy and deserving of Fijians.

Many such policies have been quoted but they have not been followed up. Some of these policies have already been suggested in the past development plans, Ministry of Education annual reports and in the Fiji Education Commission Report. The tentativeness of many of these proposals indicates that there was never any real effort made to implement them. Hardly any has

been subjected to extensive research within this country despite the fact that the successful resolution of this national problem could decide the extent to which we will continue to share this piece of earth harmoniously together as a multi-ethnic society.

What should then be the basis of new national policies on Fijian education? An examination of the Fijian dropout position indicates that the bulk of the Fijian pupils drop out at the end of Form 4. This would indicate that the majority of the dropouts leave after having failed the Fiji Junior examination. The majority of Fijian students who drop out at this stage attended the new secondary schools in the rural areas as against those who attended the well-established Government and urban schools. It would seem therefore that an improvement of the quality of the junior secondary schools in the rural areas could be an important step in improving this situation. This might call for some restraint in the present expansion policy of the Government to allow for consolidation and qualitative improvements.

Studies in other developing countries indicate that the quality of an institution is a significant factor in education achievement, particularly where the home does not offer a conducive educational environment. A recent study by Harris (1975), on factors influencing educational achievement in the sixth form in Fiji, also indicated that Fijians who succeeded in the sixth form were usually those who received their education in schools of good academic record.

It would also be necessary to examine further which are the critical factors that produce an institution of quality. One factor that has often been suggested in Fiji is the existence of boarding facilities. Harris, in her study, also identified this as an important correlate of achievement at the sixth form for Fijian students. Another factor relating to equipment and books is also important. A related exploratory study by Elley and others (1978) of USP indicated the existence of a relationship between the number of books in a library and the reading ability of pupils in Fiji schools.

The above studies are still exploratory and they represent possible avenues of research which if indicated and consciously supported could have an interesting bearing on policies to improve the quality of education in the rural areas. Many other factors which appear to be significant and which could also be examined are those of teacher quality, quality of administrative support, school location, factors relating to home background and achievement motivation, competency in English, etc. These are mentioned only to indicate the kind of tasks that could be done if the nation intends to pursue a long-term policy that would be more acceptable to the whole community and more effective in improving the quality of Fijian education.

Even in the short term, other less blatantly discriminating policies could

be pursued. One such policy is to allocate Government scholarships or assistance according to rural and urban criteria. Each education district could have its quota of scholarships, divided accordingly between rural and urban places, depending on its population breakdown. Another way is to allocate scholarships on a school basis in which some weighting is given in favour of less-advantaged schools. Thirdly, a composite scheme could involve the allocation of a proportion of scholarships to the best students (irrespective of ethnic criteria) and the rest to be given on the basis of either, or a combination of the above criteria.

These are not impossible tasks; we have the people and the resources to examine these issues if only this nation has the *will* to face the challenge.

In my view, the so-called Fijian education problem is a national problem and the extent to which we are going to resolve it is going to determine in a significant way how we are going to live together in this country as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Can we afford not to meet this challenge?

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