POLITICAL EDUCATION IN A DEVELOPING PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: A CASE FOR FIJI*

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INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this paper I shall examine a number of general concepts and ideas related to political education, namely, the nature of political education, some agencies of political education and the role of the school in political education. In the latter half of the paper I shall focus on political education and socialization in Fiji. This part of the paper will highlight some difficulties associated with political education in the context of Fiji's pluralistic setting and some political implications of the current trends of political socialization/education in the development of Fiji as a nation.

THE NATURE OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

If we accept that politics is concerned with the study of the means of governance in a society — how these originate, their conditions and the terms by which they are established and maintained — then we can look upon political education as the induction and initiation of young members of a society into matters and issues relating to the way we are governed.

Some distinction is usually made between education and socialization. The latter — socialization — usually refers to the more informal means of acquiring ideas and skills by way of informal contacts with members of one's community (parents, peers and other significant adults, etc.) whereas education refers to the more formal forms of training (i.e., schools, training centres, etc.). The two terms are not exclusive; they are usually interrelated and they often occur together. The two terms are therefore often interchangeable.

Some distinction is usually made between education and indoctrination. The

latter — indoctrination — normally involves a situation where the learner is given no choice in what he is learning and invariably the learner is coerced or forced to learn (knowledge, skills and attitudes) what he is given. In recent history many examples of totalitarian government (Nazi Germany, the People's Republic of China, etc.) have used formal institutions of learning, i.e., schools, universities, etc., as agencies of indoctrination. In fact, the formal school system is normally used as the major agency for indoctrination. On the other hand, education does not normally involve coercion. It relies on the willingness of the learner to learn what has been presented. If the learner has not reached the 'age of consent', his parents' consent is usually solicited and obtained.

Many people regard the teachings of the various churches as indoctrination if some elements of threat are involved. The threat of 'spiritual punishment' may be as real as other tangible punishments to many committed members of the church. Church teachings presented in this way could be regarded as indoctrination.

THE AGENCIES OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

There are many agencies by which we learn ideas about the way we are governed and the attitudes and skills involved. Some agencies are more effective than others in the inculcation of the things that we learn or acquire.

The family and the home or what are regarded as *primary groups* are by far the most effective agencies of socialization. They are particularly effective in the development of attitudes, feelings and values. This means that our attitudes towards other people, e.g., other ethnic groups, other political ideologies and systems, the things we value most or those that we feel strongly about, are largely fostered by significant members of our immediate family, e.g., parents, at a fairly early age. This explains why people tend to vote the way their parents do irrespective of the differences — social, economic or otherwise — that may exist between them and their parents.

Attitudes take longer to be developed in comparison with knowledge, skills, etc., and their development requires a 'living situation' where the attitudes are continually fostered and reinforced. The strength of attitudes is indicated by the difficulty with which they can be changed once they are set.

The *secondary groups,* i.e., the school, clubs, church and other associated groups, appear to be important in the development of knowledge, i.e., information, facts and concepts, and of skills, e.g., cognitive skills of identifying problems, skills of reading, writing and numeracy, skills of sorting

out facts from fiction, etc.

The school is by far the most durable of secondary groups/institutions and people stay or associate with it much longer than with other groups, and it is probably most effective in teaching the more general things.

Schools have a tendency to 'shy away' from the kind of teaching that is directly related to the way we are governed. Civics curricula are usually shortlived, if they emerge at all. The only type of curriculum that can be identified as satisfying some form of political education/instruction is the social science curriculum (or geography and history). The school in Fiji faces two difficulties in teaching curriculum related to political education:

(i) the difficulty associated with the identification of the concepts, ideas and knowledge that need to be taught and encouraged; and

(ii) the difficulty associated with the actual teaching of political concepts, ideas and knowledge by teachers.

Members of the 'school public' do not seem to agree on what needs to be taught and fostered. Even the members of the teaching fraternity are divided along racial lines and these divisions also reflect their political affiliations. It is stated that no teaching is neutral: it involves interpretation on the part of the teacher, commitment on the part of the learner and value judgements on the part of both. Paulo Freire contends that education is either an act of freedom (conscientization) or an act of oppression (massification).

Some other secondary groups/organizations are probably more effective than the schools in developing political awareness, viz., clubs, associations and youth groups. Because these organizations exist for particular purposes they can easily be directed to meet the special needs of youth and they can be focussed more easily on political issues. Secondly, they attract young adults who are in a situation to choose what they want and hence their programmes are most likely to reflect their members' needs. Thirdly, these institutions are usually not as closely scrutinized by the government as is the school and therefore they can respond quickly and effectively to the needs of their clientele.

POLITICAL EDUCATION IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Even in more homogeneous countries like Tonga and Samoa or in predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries like Australia and New Zealand, differences of values and political opinions are likely to make it difficult for schools to reach agreement on some political education curricula. The situation is more difficult

in pluralistic societies like Fiji, Hawaii, etc. Special difficulties are encountered when there is a clear distinction drawn between various cultures or ethnic groups. Human groups tend to be naturally inclined to live and associate with their own groups and this of itself can create barriers to integration, assuming that this were a desirable goal. If, on the other hand, the differences between human groups are highlighted or enshrined in a constitution and used as a justification for differential treatment, as they are in Fiji (and in South Africa, for that matter) barriers against integration are further compounded.

In Fiji the various agencies of political socialization and education have tended to develop separately for each major ethnic group. The Indians tend to predominate in urban and semi-urban areas and the Fijian in rural and semi-rural areas.

Schools are organized largely on the basis of ethnicity. There is a tendency also for the other secondary groups/organizations, e.g., churches, clubs and other associations, to reflect and reinforce the ethnic division of our society. Because the primary and secondary groups and associations develop separately, they tend to encourage and foster the development of communal, political views and attitudes. These attitudes will probably reflect those espoused by each respective communal group and they are likely to have developed without the benefit of the views and perspectives of other different groups within the society. Naturally many of these attitudes are likely to be contradictory to the interests of other groups. Because there is only limited machinery to facilitate the resolution of differences and an absence of a tradition within which they can be resolved at the local level, the differences are allowed to mount and are open to exploitation by communal-minded politicians.*

The earlier the different groups are brought together and the earlier young people from various ethnic groups and cultures are exposed to and at least made aware of the different 'life views' of others, the easier it is for people to appreciate possible causes of friction and confrontation and to take steps to alleviate many needless conflicts. If we continue to allow views, political opinions, etc., to be 'firmed up' before they are discussed and realistically questioned we cannot expect anything more than the politics of confrontation — along ethnic lines — that we have at the moment.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT TRENDS OF POLITICAL EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION

The perpetuation of a non-integrated system of school and local government

* E.g., politicians elected by their own ethnic groups as against those elected by all the three major ethnic groups.

will continue to accentuate ethnic and political divisions. Pupils of various ethnic groups will continue to attend schools that are supported by their own ethnic or religious groups and where they will probably be taught by teachers who are also from their own ethnic groups. As a result a large number of our young people will develop political attitudes and ideas that are fostered in communal settings and which are likely to encourage divisive attitudes of confrontation. Such an atmosphere of confrontation encourages divisiveness. The moderates in various communities are likely to be forced to take up extreme positions, as has happened at the two previous elections in Fiji. Various groups are also likely to retreat into more traditional forms of organization and leadership which will be inimical to national development. Current moves to resuscitate certain traditional forms of Fijian organization and leadership are examples of this reaction.

Such confrontation will endanger the atmosphere of free, open and rational discussion, an important prerequisite for a democratic society. Confrontation will also retard our progress towards the attainment of equitable social and economic goals for our society. It will tend to direct attention away from the real and urgent issues of youth employment and alienation, growing economic inequalities, urban problems, rural poverty, etc., that face this country. The resolution of these urgent problems will require a great deal of national effort and we cannot afford to dissipate our energy on divisive confrontation.

CONCLUSIONS

The important agencies of political education in Fiji, the home, church, school, etc., are organized along ethnic lines. These organizations reflect the divisions that exist in Fiji society. Consequently the majority of the young people in Fiji derive their ideas about politics from people of their own ethnic groups and they have little opportunity of being exposed to or made to understand the political positions of other ethnic groups during their schooling years. The present position tends to accentuate divisiveness and it will do little to reduce political confrontation along ethnic lines. If Fiji is to continue to strengthen its sense of national unity in the light of its ethnic diversity, it may need to re-examine its policies in relation to integrating its schools and other relevant agencies of political education.