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EMBARGOED

PREJUDICE AND FEAR IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION

8.30 am TUESDAY JUNE 24

Unless one belongs to a rather small minority of people over forty years old, one has had little or no experience of education systems less extraordinary and bizarre than the one we have inherited. Because of this it is not always apparent just how odd it really is. It is therefore a useful exercise to try to imagine one's self as a stray visitor from a different planet, small in stature and with the typical green skin pigmentation that science fiction writers always assign to such people. What a conundrum such a party of would-be immigrants would present to our authorities. Where would they live? What jobs would they be allowed to perform? In what buses and trains would they travel? What toilets would they use? Above all what schools would their children attend?

In any country other than South Africa, once the initial excitement had worn off, there would be no further problems. The little green men would find a place to live, a job and a school for their children according to their own choice. They would probably prefer to live fairly close together, but apart from that perfectly natural tendency, they would rapidly settle down and make their own way in life. In South Africa, of course, that would be impossible. It would be unthinkable to let them choose their own neighbourhood, buses, jobs and schools. They would present a terrible threat to the whole South African way of life. Commissions would deliberate for years on the problem of how to classify

them, or for whom they should be allowed to vote or rub shoulders with. Acts of Parliament would have to be passed. Perhaps they would be given their own homeland. I am sure that civil servants in Pretoria must sometimes sit bolt upright in bed at night as they awake from the horrors of such a nightmare.

How on earth do we find ourselves in such a situation? Our Lord, speaking once on the subject of divorce, said "In the beginning it was not so", and the same is true of this question of fear of and prejudice towards people who differ from us, particularly as far as education is concerned. Small children have no racial prejudice : even to-day one sees them playing happily together, oblivious of the fact that they are anything other than fellow human beings. One still sees it on the farms; I see it nearly every day in the streets and on the fields of Grahamstown. Then suddenly, when they are about seven years old, their little worlds are torn apart, and each is marked to tread a very different path through life.

Why is this so? It is because their elders (or at least some of their elders) care more about their language, their culture, and their traditions than they do about life itself. It is good and right that groups of people should care deeply about their religion, their language, their common heritage of culture and tradition. Troubles begin,

and fear and prejudice creep in, when people care so vehemently about these things that they erect great walls around themselves to keep out the contamination of other people. The other people resent being kept out, or even more so, resent being forcibly dragged in and made to conform against their will. This type of ethnic or cultural exclusiveness, or its even more obnoxious twin brother, ethnic and cultural imperialism, enforced by the power of law, is an almost infallible prescription for tension and disorder, more particularly in the field of education. Take for example the anglicisation programmes of Lord Charles Somerset and Lord Milner. We are suffering the consequences even to-day in the rigid demarcation of English and Afrikaans schools, with the State and not the parents by and large deciding which school system the child shall attend. The original policy, and the inevitable counteraction which it invoked, have done more to perpetrate misunderstandings and mutual recriminations between the English and Afrikaans-speaking sectors of the White population group than any other single issue. If a further example is required, we hardly need reminding of the consequences of the attempt to enforce Afrikaans language teaching of certain subjects on the schools of Soweto. The people concerned in this issue have spoken their mind clearly and unequivocally : after a certain period of mother-tongue instruction they wish the language of education to be English. The point has been won, as it inevitably had

to be, but the folly of attempting to enforce a course of action contrary to the deeply felt desires of the people has been demonstrated beyond any need of further proof.

If a diversity of languages, cultures and traditions are to be cherished and preserved in as heterogeneous society as South Africa, this must be achieved by a process of voluntary association. A living proof that this can be attained is supplied by considering the case of the Jewish community, not only in South Africa, but in numerous other countries. Because they care so intensely about their distinctive religious and cultural background, the Jews have been able to maintain their identity without benefit of special legal protection, and indeed in many cases at enormous cost where the legal enactments have worked to their serious disadvantage. Where special distinctiveness is not highly regarded, what distinctiveness there is will slowly wither and attenuate, until the lifestyle of the group evolves to the point that it is indistinguishable from that of the majority. Prejudice against and fear of the group will diminish accordingly.

One of the impediments to the gradual growing together of the various educational systems, the language issue, has since Soweto disappeared from the agenda. Beyond the elementary grades it is no longer a matter for debate that education for Africans and Indians will be through the

medium of English. The position in the Coloured schools is not yet so clearcut, but nonetheless language has ceased to be a major divisive and disruptive issue.

Even if the very important issue of disparity of resources, to which I shall be referring again later, could be satisfactorily resolved a number of serious causes of prejudice, misunderstanding and fear still remain. The various population groups are at differing stages of adaptation to a complex, industrialised style of living. The Whites are furthest along this road, followed in order by the Indians, Coloureds and Africans. Then there is the fear on the part of the Whites of the overwhelming numbers of Blacks, whom they envisage as swamping their schools, if the legal barriers against admission are removed or even relaxed. Finally there is a problem of age gap, particularly in the high schools, where by and large Black pupils in a given Form are considerably older than their White counterparts. This is particularly noticeable in the senior classes. The presence in Black schools of many young men twenty years of age and even older, gives rise to fears in the minds of Whites that their children will be physically overwhelmed if the restrictions are removed.

These factors, and the fears to which they give rise, are very real, and cannot simply be wished away. On the other

hand the reactions which these factors evoke amongst Whites are seen by many Blacks as insincere foot dragging and evidence of White determination to retain their position of privilege, and particularly the unfair economic advantages which this privilege gives rise to. The painful results of boycotts, destruction of property and frustration are all too obviously prevalent to occasion much further comment.

The frustrations and sense of injustice, particularly amongst the younger generation of Blacks, gives rise to understandable demands for an instant and immediate redress of the historical imbalance. Even if the enormous economic resources such immediate redress would demand were to be rapidly forthcoming huge and intractable problems would remain. The most serious of these problems is unquestionably the lack of availability of teachers, both in respect of quantity and quality.

We are rapidly approaching a major point of crisis in South African education. If we are to have any hope of avoiding the vicious cycle of boycotts escalating into violence which in turn engenders a reaction of firm repression until law and order is restored, which in its turn leads to sullenness and apathy, two major changes in attitude are of prime importance. On the part of the Whites a real sense of urgency and commitment is essential. This must be matched on the part of Blacks with a realistic assessment

of just how fast change can be brought about, given the commitment of the Whites.

At this stage mere words and promises alone are not an acceptable reaction. The least that is acceptable is clear evidence of a change of direction, backed by an unequivocal commitment to a detailed timetable of steps to be accomplished and corresponding resources to be committed. Some pointers in the right direction are already forthcoming. For example, as from next year all new teachers in training will be required to have a minimum matriculation qualification. The Prime Minister himself has demonstrated some receptivity to the idea of a single command structure for all education, instead of the present dispensation whereby education is the concern of no fewer than four government departments. This question is of such symbolic as well as real importance that it must be given a high priority. I cannot imagine a single step that will make a greater contribution to reassuring Black people that their educational needs are being taken seriously. A small step in this direction is the decision that Black schools in Natal will in future write the matriculation examination of the Natal Education Department.

With the best will in the world one cannot imagine how any realistic programme of betterment can reach fruition in less than ten years. This conclusion is clearly a

disappointing one to many people, but with twelve years of formal schooling to be considered it is hard to imagine how any more optimistic time period could be attained. The first difficulty is where to start, from the top down or from the bottom up. Logically, one is inclined to the view that one starts with the grades and builds up to the more senior classes on the solid foundations already laid. Unfortunately, with the enormous numbers to contend with, the steep drop-off in enrolment as one proceeds upwards in the school programme and the crippling shortage of properly qualified teachers, it probably makes more practical sense to begin at the top and gradually work downwards until one has high schools of a much more acceptable standard, before concentrating on the primary schools. Whatever decision is reached it must be done so quickly and commitments must be adhered to.

The problem of disparity of resources must be faced squarely. We are all aware of how much more the State spends on the yearly education of a single White child than it does on a Black one. The disparity in resources not only encompasses very visible differences in teacher pay scales, but also obvious contrasts in the qualifications of the teachers and in the quality of school buildings, laboratory and other equipment, libraries and playing fields. It will take an enormous deployment of resources to bring the quality of all education up to the standards

presently enjoyed by the White school children. With the best will in the world it just may not be feasible to do so in the short term. On the other hand it is no longer possible to justify, if indeed it ever was, the huge discrepancy between what is spent on the per capita schooling of White children and that of other race groups. As a way out of this dilemma I should like to make a fairly radical proposal. The fiscal authorities should be charged with determining how much the public exchequer can afford towards the per capita annual cost of the education of each and every child in South Africa, regardless of race. A reasonable estimate of this figure would be in the vicinity of R300 p.a., approximately what is currently spent on Indian education, much in excess of what is spent on African and Coloured education and about half of the White quota. This reallocation of resources would permit an enormous upgrading of African and Coloured education, but would present a severe problem for White schooling. My answer is if that is the sum that the State can afford then those who desire a level of education in excess of this minimum must be prepared to make sacrifices to obtain it. The State should provide what it can by way of teacher posts and buildings, and the Governing Body of the school, after consultation with the parents, must provide the extra facilities by levying fees. As a reasonable compensation for the lower level of funding of the better endowed schools, all school fees should automatically be tax deductible.

This mechanism has the tremendous advantage of eliminating all unfairness in the allocation of State resources to schooling. It also eliminates an artificial and inequitable distinction between private and State schools. Every school would become in fact a potential private school in that it would have the right to levy fees in order to provide facilities beyond those which the State can afford. Those parents, Black or White, who are prepared (or able) to make extra sacrifices to provide their children superior education are given an opportunity to do so. Those who will not will be provided with in most cases a far better education than is presently the case.

Before you reject what I have described as an unrealistic, fanciful, pie-in-the-sky idea let me remind you that an excellent and most successful precedent already exists, right in the heart of that much maligned but surprisingly flexible province, the Orange Free State. Several former private schools in Bloemfontein operate on precisely this system, with excellent results. The Province maintains the buildings and pays the salaries of the established quota of teachers. Extra teachers and other facilities are provided through fees far below the level of most fully private schools. The only criticism I have is that the schools as yet are not in the position to accept Black pupils. If it can work in the Vrystaat, why should it not be equally successful elsewhere?

Flexibility is the keyword we are seeking in the educational environment today. In order to overcome the frightening backlog we must explore all possibilities, including adult or continuing education, as well as business and vocational training. Tremendous tax incentives to businesses for training schemes are already available. In order to provide maximum opportunity the definition of training schemes should be interpreted as widely as possible to include secretarial and business colleges and other specialised institutions. These institutions have the great advantage of being located in central business districts generally away from residential areas, so removing a whole spectrum of fears and prejudices, of therefore being easily accessible to all race groups and of offering classes at times suitable for people with jobs. One particularly successful arrangement has been evolved by several organisations offering computer training. The whole scheme is funded by businesses anxious to employ scarce computer programmers and who will guarantee a job to anybody who successfully completes the course. The applicants from all race groups are carefully screened and only those capable of making a success of it are accepted for the course. Whether they complete it or not, it does not cost them a cent. This imaginative scheme deserves emulation on a much wider scale.

Many companies overseas have highly developed in-house

training and education programmes entirely funded by the company. Employees under these programmes are able to complete high school as well as tertiary level courses by remaining on at the workplace after hours to be attended by teachers and lecturers especially contracted by the company. The benefits to the employee are obvious. Those to the company include a better educated, contented and stable labour force. This idea does not seem to have caught on to any great extent in South Africa, but it would seem to me to offer enormous opportunities to contribute to our education backlog, which will take a very long time to eliminate if we do not consider all the possibilities open to us.

No matter how imaginative we are or how many resources we employ our schemes can easily come to nought because of fears by the Whites that their standards are being eroded, and fears by the Blacks that they are being fobbed off with a second class education. To overcome these perfectly human and explicable fears we must approach our problems in a spirit of compassion, reconciliation and concern. If the Whites were really concerned for the legitimate educational aspirations of the Blacks they would have no time to cherish their own emotional paranoias. The Blacks in their turn, must rise above their anger and frustration, which, however justified, are essentially negative and destructive traits, and realise with patience and

compassion, that provided a committed change of direction is clearly demonstrated we still have a long hard road ahead of us. Provided we all pull together we shall eventually overcome our difficulties.

One great fear I have kept until the last because it is not a divisive fear, a fear of White against Black or of Black against White, but a fear we should all share in common. In the desperate scramble for education we almost subconsciously fall into the trap of valuing education, not for its own sake, but for what it can bring us in the way of power, wealth or prestige. We tend to regard it as a tool for climbing the ladder of success, and we lose sight of an attitude of mind that regards education as important and valuable in its own right. Let us take an analogy from sport. To-day people strive for excellence in sport because of the earnings or prestige it can bring. A top professional in a number of sports can become a rich and famous man, and that is a great temptation to neglect sport as a recreational or character-building activity. An absolutely controlled, well-trained and beautiful body is a good in itself, whether it be that of the athlete or the dancer. To take a purely professional view is to turn sport into yet another avenue of work rather than a beautiful thing in itself. As in so many other important matters the ancient Greeks understood these things perfectly. The winners in their contests were crowned

with laurel wreaths and not with monetary prizes.

The same fate can befall education. Just as a controlled and well-trained body is a good in itself so is a controlled and well-trained mind. Education to earn one's living is of course important but if we take a too shortsighted view we shall never undertake any mental activity, for the sheer pleasure of it, such as reading a good novel or a book of poems. As a result we could become much more impoverished human beings.

Let us return once more to sport for a useful parallel. Less than a month ago over 4000 people, men and women, young and old, Black and White, spent up to eleven footsore and gruelling hours running the ninety kilometres from Pietermaritzburg to Durban in the justly named Comrades Marathon. Not one competitor earned a cent for his efforts. They subjected themselves to this ultimate physical test of endurance to demonstrate that they were capable of such discipline and dedication, and to experience the exhilaration of doing it together. Not so many years ago Blacks were debarred from competing, but those shameful days are now happily past.

To my mind the Comrades Marathon is a beautiful parallel of how we must tackle our educational problems in South Africa. First, it is essential to do it together. Next, we must

realise it is a hard and exacting task, requiring the utmost in training and stamina. Finally, when we reach the end of the journey we must look forward to an equally daunting road ahead next year, and so on until at least the year 2000.

In earlier and less complicated ages, when most men earned their bread by the sweat of their brows, learning was necessary in only a few professions. The most complicated devices with which most people came into contact were the rifle and the steam engine, and their workings could be mastered with only a limited amount of application. To-day practically every occupation requires reasonable literary and arithmetic skills and the intellectual ability to absorb further training. In the harsh competitive world of the end of the Twentieth century nations must realise the full mental capacities of all their citizens. In the words of the famous British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead:

"In conditions of modern life the rule is absolute: the race which does not value trained intelligence is doomed ... There will be no appeal from the judgment which will be pronounced on the uneducated."

That South Africa should fail to heed these wise words of Whitehead is my ultimate educational fear.

This conference has been convened so that we may have the

opportunity to consider the educational road that lies ahead of us, up to the year 2000, and possibly even a little beyond. I have been asked to outline some of the fears and prejudices that are stumbling blocks on that road, and by implication to consider some of the means of overcoming those fears. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the depths of the Great Depression reminded his countrymen that what they chiefly had to fear was fear itself. Perhaps it is that fear of fear that has caused our present paralysis.

Provided that we have enough courage to make the effort to understand each other, and having done so to work together to overcome our problems, then we can succeed. In my view this conference will in no small measure make a contribution to this process of understanding and cooperation. Let us therefore cast our fears and prejudices, our angers and frustrations aside, and go forward in a spirit of hope and adventure.

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