

UKFIET 10th Biennial Conference on Education & Development

Politics, Policies and Progress

EDUCATION: JEWEL IN THE COMMONWEALTH'S

CROWN

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OXFORD

Greetings and beginnings

How can I begin save by acknowledging what a great joy it is to be here with you at the University of Oxford this morning. My much cherished honorary doctorate of Oxford allows me the immodesty of a sense of belonging; but I need no parchment to sanction my pleasure in being among you whose professional lives are so entwined with education and development – pursuits which in different ways have framed my life as well, and make us kin. Guest though I am, I feel at home among you here.

This is UKFIET's 10th Biennial Conference – we thus meet to celebrate twenty years of service by this remarkable organisational network – the UK Forum for International Education and Training. It is a special occasion indeed; and one that I am sure will be reflected in the quality of your debates this week. Given that my own contribution to your discussions will draw heavily on Commonwealth experience I am pleased to note that your membership has from the start included Commonwealth organisations and that they have often co-sponsored events with you at Marlborough House in London.

The time and place of this gathering is quite special in another sense. Fifty years ago in the summer of 1959 the University of Oxford hosted the first Commonwealth Education Conference, launching the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, and laying the foundations for collaborative work in education that was to become the province of the Commonwealth Secretariat six years later.

And, of course that Oxford Conference also inaugurated a Conference series the latest of which, the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, was held in Kuala Lumpur in June this year. It is a series of Ministerial Meetings that has earned a special niche in the international education calendar.

I assume you have chosen me as your keynote speaker with the expectation that towards the end of a long international career I could share with you insights on progress, policies and politics in the last half century of international educational development since that Oxford Conference; and that I might do so with understanding of the Commonwealth milieu in which so much of that development was moulded. I shall try to respond after that fashion; but without allowing retrospection to overwhelm ambition for tomorrow.

What enormous changes there have been in those fifty years! In 1959, UNESCO's four big regional education development Conferences - in Karachi, Addis Ababa, Santiago, and Beirut - had not yet taken place; the World Bank was yet to make its first loan for education; the notion of educational planning was in its infancy; and Theodore Schultz and others were only then making Western educators familiar with the notion of investment in education for economic growth, even though the Russian Strumilin had written about the economic significance of national education in the USSR 35 years earlier, and even economists like Adam Smith at the end of the 18th century were by no means unfamiliar with the concept. Ideas of educational development, like a big ship, take a long time to turn.

In bringing to bear my personal perspectives on how policies and politics have shaped education progress, or lack of it, in the 50 year period since 1959 – particularly at international level, but also in a national, country context - I shall be drawing on my own experience over the last half century, and in three roughly equal phases:

- as a Caribbean person from Guyana, my home country, and the wider Caribbean region in the first third of this time span until 1975;
- as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth in the middle fifteen years from 1975 to 1990;
- And finally in retirement, though my family disputes the description, for the final third of the period up to the present day.

During each of these three phases and not just the middle one I have been fortunate to be allowed a role on the wider international stage, both regionally in the Caribbean and internationally on UN and other Commissions. I have naturally engaged extensively with education issues in that period but mainly in the wider context of international and national development and the inter-linkages between education and other aspects of social and economic advancement. And in all this I was so greatly helped by outstandingly committed workers in the vineyard of Commonwealth education, like Peter Williams, Hilary Perraton, and Steve Packer whose presence with us here today I would ask you to recognise.

The Theme

You have selected as your alliterative theme; '*politics, policies and progress*', three crucially important concepts in relation to education development. The last of these ('progress') has definite connotations of improvement, but the others are relatively neutral terms unless you define them in the context of progress, as I do.

You might have chosen three more challenging words – say ‘power’, ‘privilege’ and ‘poverty’; or a more lofty sounding series like ‘principles’, ‘partnership’, ‘participation’. But the three you have chosen provide an inclusive frame of deliberations into which, I feel sure, those other alliterative concepts will repeatedly insinuate themselves.

With appropriate caution in the midst of so many who know so much more, I shall argue that although progress in education appears from some perspectives to be self-evident, progress itself is a coat of many colours, chameleon like in the eyes of the beholder. In some respects, certainly for some, education provision is no ‘better’ in 2009 than in 1959. Education has certainly not succeeded in bringing all the benefits to society that starry-eyed enthusiasts anticipated 50 years ago.

Politics is a necessary part of the process of reaching decisions and getting them implemented. Despite the bad vibes often associated with politics – ‘playing politics’ etc. – political processes are a necessary part of development implementation. Educators need the muscle of politicians as much as politicians need the professionalism of educators. With distance between them nothing will happen; with an adversarial relationship, education will suffer.

As regards international co-operation in education, developments have not been uniformly beneficial. Education aid has enormously expanded but a large part of the increase has been in bilateral aid: in multilateral institutions it is the least democratic ones that have the largest resource increase. I shall suggest that there are other, fairer and more beneficial, modes of international co-operation, which the Commonwealth to some extent exemplifies.

The Commonwealth

In speaking of the experience of Commonwealth countries, and of co-operation between them in the development of education, I shall try to do so in an illustrative sense, so that those of you coming from other parts of the world will, I trust, find that my observations chime well with your own experience.

So, let me share with you a snapshot of that Commonwealth. In 2009 the Commonwealth celebrates not just 50 years of education co-operation but also the 60th anniversary, more significant in many ways, of the London Declaration of 1949. That Declaration by the Commonwealth’s then political leadership, led by Attlee and Nehru and Lester Pearson, established the Commonwealth as a free association of independent states which could include not only the former

'Dominions', like Australia or Canada, but also newly independent states which in some cases, most notably India, had chosen republican status.

In 1949 the Commonwealth had just eight members. By 1959, when that Commonwealth Education Conference was held here in Oxford, Ghana and Malaysia as well had become independent and the number was 10. But the decolonisation 'wind of change' was blowing at gale force and today, in 2009, there are 53 member states with a few more on the sidelines waiting to join - or, in the case of Zimbabwe, hopefully to rejoin.

These 53 states amount to a quarter of the countries of the world, and together they contain 2 billion people, a third of the planet's inhabitants: with members coming from every continent, bordering every ocean.

So the Commonwealth is a microcosm of the world's variety: from India's 1.1 billion people to Tuvalu's 10,000. It brings together uniquely in our troubled world, super powers of yesterday and tomorrow, the world's middle countries and its smallest states. 60% of members have populations of under 3m and half the members are small island states in the Caribbean, Pacific, Indian Ocean and Mediterranean. Specially important are the regional groupings and affiliations SADC, CARICOM, SAARC, the EU to which Commonwealth Members belong. In the Caribbean and Pacific such regional groupings reach into the education sector through regional universities and examination boards. Our Commonwealth Education Community is a global village.

At inter-governmental level there are three main bodies - the Secretariat (backed by the CFTC) which has its own group of Education staff; the Commonwealth of Learning dedicated to co-operation in distant and open learning, backed by the new technologies; and the Commonwealth Foundation which supports civil society initiatives. The Secretariat and Foundation are based at Marlborough House in London and the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada.

The Commonwealth itself is a contrast of weaknesses and strengths. In 'hard power' it is near the bottom of the league. Like the Pope, it commands no battalions. But in 'soft power' - in terms of capacity to innovate and influence then, for its size, the Commonwealth may be near the top of the league:

- it is a bridge and meeting point for countries at different stages of development and different religions, cultures and interests;

- it has a capacity to pioneer creative thinking on development, trade, debt, climate change, security, good governance, the place of small states in the global family;
- it is a standard setter on democracy and good governance;
- it is a mediator in international disputes – through the good offices role of the Secretary General;
- it has convening power disproportionate to its resources.

And behind the association of states is the Commonwealth of peoples with a galaxy of formal Commonwealth associations, business and trade interconnections, and informal family linkages. One estimate is that two thirds of the population of the UK has close kin no more distant than second cousins in another Commonwealth country. There are Diasporas of Britons, Indians, Nigerians, West Indians and others scattered throughout the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth and Education

Three golden threads beyond all others bind Commonwealth countries together. To follow your alliterative lead – Language, Law and Learning. Education is not the least of them. In this context, underlying the formal structures of inter-governmental co-operation is

- a shared inheritance of ideas – a unity of ethics - about education provision in terms of e.g. the autonomy of universities, separation of teaching services from the civil service, partnership between faith providers and the state, decentralisation, school committees and boards of governors, independent inspection etc .
- networks of partnerships, linkages and exchanges between universities and schools in different countries
- patterns and traditions of intra-Commonwealth student and teacher mobility
- trading relationships in terms of publishers, software firms, examination bodies, equipment suppliers, consultants etc
- professional and institutional associations like the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers, the Commonwealth Teachers’ Group and the Council for Education in the Commonwealth.

The distinguishing features of Commonwealth intergovernmental work on education co-operation, mainly through the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth of Learning in the past 50 years have been

- co-operative programmes and institutions of which the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and the Commonwealth of Learning have probably been the best known and most successful;
- creative new ventures like the Virtual University of Small States and the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol;
- pioneering thinking and initial work on themes that international bodies have then taken up, like education and small states, support and management of teachers, distance education co-operation, education and gender, student mobility;
- practical support for member states especially those striving to build national systems in the face of special challenges. This has meant backing independence movements in southern Africa, support for newly independent states, reconstruction in fragile states and those torn by strife.

While direct assistance to member countries in special need has been crucial at particular moments in time, I must emphasise that the Commonwealth is not in essence an aid agency. It is first and foremost a mutual co-operative of members who draw on each other's strengths, using South-South as much as North-South co-operation.

Progress Policies and Politics in Education

Reverting now to our Conference title, but taking the three 'P's in reverse order, let me share with you some thoughts on progress, policies and politics in education - first from a national perspective and then in the context of the international order.

What about ***Progress*** in education in the last half century at country level? The overall picture is that

- Expansion of provision in absolute terms has been extraordinary and dramatic. To take two Commonwealth examples from opposite ends of the population scale – India and Botswana. In India primary school enrolment has grown from an estimated 35 million in 1960 to about 140 million now, representing a fourfold increase and a staggering additional 100m children; and in Botswana (still Bechuanaland back in 1960) from 36 thousand then to 327 thousand now, nine times as many. Fifty years ago the great majority of the 53 countries of today's Commonwealth had no university of their own. In 2009 the only countries lacking their own national university or membership of the shared University of the West Indies and University of

the South Pacific are the two micro-states in the Indian Ocean, Seychelles and Maldives.

- Progress towards the two education targets under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - universal primary completion and gender equality has been remarkable. The first of these is a tough benchmark to meet because it involves not just putting children into school but keeping them there. The latest data show that 24 out of 43 Commonwealth countries for which information is available have net enrolment rates of over 90% at primary level. In as many as 36 countries gender parity in access to primary education has been attained. I would also remind you that achievement of the first target involves most countries trying to run up the 'down' escalator, with population growth of 3% p.a. not uncommon: to put that in perspective a middle-sized country with 80% of children in school in 2007 – say 6 million children - would need to raise this to 15 million places by 2030. Although some of the past universal primary education targets have been missed, that has been due just as much to unprecedented population growth, as to any failure of school populations to reach target levels.
- Education provision has been diversified with new disciplines, old professions upgraded from certificate to diploma and degree level; and education management has taken on board many new functions like curriculum development, planning and statistics, monitoring and evaluation.
- Teachers, like other professionals, are much better educated and qualified.
- National education systems have been 'indigenised' in terms of management and teaching personnel, and also in terms of curriculum content and examinations.

YET, in spite of this:

- Many children still underperform and are illiterate even after 5 or 6 years schooling
- Statistics for enrolment conceal the fact that absenteeism may be rife among teachers and pupils
- The brightest and best are often not going into teaching and the education profession suffers poor morale
- Inequalities between the best and worst schools remain serious and equality of opportunity is still far off.

While in a general sense, the relationship between education and the wellbeing of society has become better understood, and has resulted in increased spending on educational services, this has sometimes led to unrealistic demands that education systems should advance democracy and civic responsibility, foster international understanding, cure family breakdown, promote social cohesion, prevent crime, prepare youth for self employment, forestall the spread of AIDS, end obesity, make society more equal etc. The list is endless.

Only too clearly such hopes for education as the fount of progress are exaggerated. We have learned that education mirrors society as well as shapes it: school and college systems tend to reinforce rather than challenge social hierarchies. Like the rest of society education has been infected with the forces of individualism and competition; disrespect for authority and traditional sanctions; decline of family authority. If we have become more realistic in our expectations of education, that surely is a form of progress.

Now, **policies**. Policies form the link between broad goals and values on the one hand and concrete action on the other. Effective policies depend on

- first, a clear definition of goals and objectives. What do we mean, for example, by ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’, ‘relevance’ ‘equity’?
We must recognise the inevitable tension between education administrators who need to know what their political masters mean by their stated goals of achieving relevance and quality, and those same politicians who may sense they can widen their support base among the public by steering clear of specifics).
- second, (they require) consistency between new policies and existing policies, and the framework of incentives operating in the system;
There will often be contradictions, for example between avowed priority for vocational subjects in schools and the low weighting given to them by university admission policies.
- third, effectiveness requires translation of policies into policy instruments (regulations, financial allocations etc) that are fit for the purpose of producing intended outcomes, and can actually be implemented;
Alas, we can all cite examples of misguided measures which achieve the opposite of what was intended. An example might be the introduction of low-interest student loans to replace grants with the aim of reducing public expenditure but which are so attractive to parents and students as a way of getting funds that Government ends up paying out more and not less.

- Fourth, a good understanding of human behaviour and motivation is needed; *How do we persuade bright young men and women to enter teaching, or the ablest trained teachers to serve deprived rural schools?*
- Finally, clear articulation so that all the actors affected by the policies can have access to them and understand them clearly, whether or not they empathise with them.
Checking on policy is not always easy in countries lacking mass internet access. In many developing countries it is pretty difficult to lay your hands on a hard copy of the official education policy document or the current Education Act even in the Ministry of Education itself.

Alas, time will not allow us to review together in any detail the successive policy phases through which countries have passed in the last 50 years, as both pressing needs and fashionable responses changed over time. There was the period of manpower planning for nation building, headlong rushes for universal primary education, unification of education systems sometimes involving takeover of voluntary schools, pursuit of vocationalisation of the curriculum and a more relevant education, non-formal education, privatisation and enablement of the private sector, decentralisation, the quest for quality, measurement of outputs, Education for All (EFA) and now the MDGs.

What is clear is that stable governments and continuity of policy over prolonged periods makes a huge difference to the health of the education system. In the Commonwealth we have only to contrast the experience of successful countries on different continents - Barbados, Botswana, Mauritius and Singapore - with the disaster that has befallen Zimbabwe.

Politics. “*Seek ye first the political kingdom*” said Nkrumah. Politics, he knew well, is the art of the possible. Good education policies are not enough. It is necessary to garner support if they are to be implemented. This requires skills of leadership, persuasion and sometimes compromise; particularly, but not only, in democratic systems. Even military dictatorships must gain an element of consent if they are to survive.

While the association of ‘politics’ with the pursuit of power can create cynicism and give it a bad name, the political process of mobilising support for desired action, often involving compromise and settling for less than the ideal, is a necessary function in any society.

Education involves many political choices and affects virtually the whole community. The location of facilities excites strong passions since the physical presence of a school, college or university helps to define the identity and status of a local community and affects the opportunities available to its young people. Perceived opportunity of access to the most prestigious schools and colleges in a country is a critical factor in winning support.

In developing countries, with their high proportions of young people, the education portfolio tends to come high in the government hierarchy. In Malaysia, for example, every one of the five or six prime Ministers up to the present has first been Minister of Education.

A particular problem in democratic politics is the short tenure of office of ministers, particularly in larger countries. Each Minister likes to make his or her mark by introducing 'reforms' by which she or he will be remembered. This is particularly problematic in education which requires long-term thinking, because of the length of the education cycle, the long lead-time for education investment to yield returns, and the period it takes to train teachers for educational expansion.

In the Caribbean there is a story of a new Minister of Education who started his tenure with a frenzied programme of visits to every school in the island – primary and secondary – until his frazzled Permanent Secretary, an old 'education' hand – asked to see him privately. 'Minister', he said, it is my duty to tell you that with your hectic programme of visits you are creating a very bad impression'. 'How could that be?' asked the startled ambitious Minister. 'You are giving the impression, Minister, that you are only here for a short time', replied the sage Permanent Secretary. And, of course, he was right; the Minister remained at 'Education' for only a short while.

The International Scene

A word about internationalism and international cooperation. Although education (at its lowest levels anyway) is basically local and national, education systems are exposed like other sectors of society to the forces of globalisation. These have increased in intensity in the last 50 years. Whether or not this necessarily represents 'progress' is a matter for debate.

- The shrinking world enhances the importance of international studies (languages, comparative studies, education for international understanding etc): and in higher education makes access to international writing and research quite essential.

- Migration has increased, requiring national education systems to adjust to increasing diversity and to adapt education programmes to learners with unfamiliar cultures and linguistic backgrounds and unrecognised qualifications.
- Part of the temporary migration flow has been for the specific purpose of study or teaching and may have been encouraged by the receiving country in its own self-interest.
- International recognition of equivalence between qualifications has consequently become a major issue
- At the same time 'brain drain' has become a threatening dimension of the situation. My own country, Guyana is a worrying example of this; but so is the Caribbean generally.
- New information and communication technologies have increased knowledge of the rest of the world and have made it possible to access knowledge and information at a distance.
- Competition and co-operation at the global level has spawned a big industry of comparative studies, international benchmarking of good practice, international league tables of universities, international programmes for the evaluation of education achievement (through OECD etc)
- Trade in educational goods and services has expanded and global corporations are now demanding 'free trade' under GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services) that would enable them to invade other 'markets' with packaged education programmes, off-shore campuses, books and publications etc. In the Caribbean, we have actually facilitated this under 'economic partnership agreements' with the EU.
- Quality assurance and consumer-protection mechanisms are required to safeguard students against rip-off degree mills selling fake qualifications over the internet.
- International education aid, multilateral - World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, Commonwealth - and bilateral - USAID, CIDA, DFID etc. - has greatly increased; but some poorer countries have an alarming level of dependence and draw as much as 50-60% of their budget from external sources.

How then did international *policies* fit into this constantly changing matrix? As regards international co-operation in education, developments have not been uniformly beneficial. All countries have been increasingly influenced by the agendas and policies of international agencies: in the case of developing countries those of the World Bank and the major bilateral assistance agencies; and in the case of more developed countries those of bodies like OECD. While education aid has enormously expanded, much of the increase has been in bilateral aid, and overly influenced by the agendas of donor countries: while in multilateral institutions it is the least democratic ones that have had the largest resource increase.

Agencies that started out as servants of development have all too often become masters, prescribing the way the world should be and what recipient countries should do. Some of their aid conditionality's appear to have been motivated by ideological prejudice in favour of liberal economic policies, pushing the private sector, worsening teacher pupil ratios in the name of efficiency, and encouraging cost-recovery from students and pupils. What has made it worse is that agency policy on things like the vocationalisation of education can change abruptly without explanation or apology. International education is by no means immune to the dictates of fashion.

A major issue in international *politics* is how to make the international system work better for all its members and not just the few who are large, wealthy and powerful. I have devoted much of my own life, working with other like-minded people to thinking through some answers and attempting to apply them.

One kind of politics is found in the Commonwealth or UNESCO which operate on the basis of one country one vote, irrespective of size and power. I described earlier the way the Commonwealth works,— through consultation, consensus and respect for diversity and difference, relying on the influence of its own 'soft' power and on its ability to empower its members, however small and potentially vulnerable they may be. These bodies are not necessarily beloved of the stronger countries, who like their wealth to bring extra clout as it does, for instance, in the World Bank. Part of the sense of alienation that some developing countries feel towards the Bank is its undemocratic constitution. Current efforts to reform the architecture of international relations revolve round efforts to give developing countries more representation there. These efforts must be strongly supported.

The alternative to democratic structures of equality is found in the mantra "he who pays the piper calls the tune". This is the basis of operation of the Breton Woods

agencies. Even in the Commonwealth the ‘ABC countries’ – Australia, Britain and Canada - exert powerful influence reflecting their budget contributions. These countries have become reluctant multilateral players in agencies that work on majority-vote principles. To get a body like the Commonwealth of Learning funded in the 1980s it was necessary to outflank some of the developed countries by persuading Brunei Darussalam, India and Nigeria to promise sufficient funds to get the institution started, effectively undermining the customary veto that the ABC countries would have.

It was impossible to work the same formula on international student mobility however, where developing countries were hard hit by the full-cost fees imposed by rich countries. I remain utterly convinced of the folly of the full cost system which kept developing country students out of British Universities to the detriment of poor countries, of course, but to the detriment of Britain and British Universities as well.

I recall the French Foreign Minister, Claude Cheysson, who had been prominent in ‘development’, asking me in the Elessye Palace when I was Commonwealth Secretary General, why was Britain turning away from its Universities the future professionals of Commonwealth countries? Nowhere in the Commonwealth, he explained, were French companies able to overcome the affinity of UK educated professionals for UK linkages and associations, whether in goods or services. “We will offer a scholarship to every such Commonwealth student”, he said, and added: “the Japanese are going further; they are offering in advance a job with a Japanese firm in the graduate’s home country when he or she returns.”.

That was thirty years ago. They must be reaping the fruits now. And that policy hurt the Commonwealth in more senses than one. I wonder how many remember that in that era before ‘full cost fees’ a young graduate from India did advanced economics at Cambridge. He is today India’s Prime Minister. But he may well be the last Prime Minister of tomorrow’s super power to have studied in Britain.

There is a second imperative, if the international system is to be made to work in a fairer way in the interest of all its members. The developing countries must assert themselves and their point of view more forcefully; sometimes exerting influence is as much a matter of doing one’s homework as of committing money. In Commonwealth meetings you can always count on the fact that the ABC countries, especially the British civil service, will have detailed first-class briefs on every subject to be discussed and will have taken time to recruit allies to press its point of view. Developing countries need to develop the same kind of determination and

political ‘savvy’ and to work together to prepare their negotiating positions in advance of international discussions – as much on education as on other subjects. Peter Williams recalls that when the much-praised Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol was approved in 2004, this owed a great deal to a Barbadian civil servant who determinedly spent much of the final night of the conference searching the internet. On the penultimate day the UK delegate had asserted that Britain lacked certain powers of licensing and enforcement in relation to the activities of private teacher recruitment agencies. This Caribbean woman diligently devoted the night hours to examining the small print of the relevant legislation and triumphantly pointed out to the surprised British delegation on the next morning that they were fully able to enforce regulation of the kind that Commonwealth developing countries were urging upon them.

To be able to resist aid-agency pressures, countries must also be ready to work together in common cause, agreeing joint policy positions and strategies. One function of a body like the Commonwealth Secretariat is to help its small and individually powerless member countries to learn negotiation strategies and to make common cause, so gaining strength through common action.

The short tenure of office of Ministers to which I referred in a national context also creates difficulties at the international level. It means ministers often lack institutional memory in relation to the international system. In the Commonwealth, where Ministers convene every three years, only about 20% of the Ministerial cohort survives more than one conference. This lack of continuity discourages a sense of shared responsibility and makes it difficult to mobilise ‘champions’ of the collective good. Thought needs to be given to creating machinery that provides continuity between Ministerial conferences – an executive Board such as the World Bank, UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning all possess, can be a helpful device for creating functional allegiance to an international agency

Let me say in concluding that in the 50 years since the first Commonwealth Education Conference here in Oxford there has been, unquestionably, remarkable progress. Unparalleled growth in education systems reflects massive demographic increase; provision of educational opportunity to people hitherto deprived of it, and increased recognition of the importance of education to the wellbeing of individuals and nations. We understand better today the contribution educational investment can make to socio-economic development; but recognise that this potential will only be realised where there is concomitant advance in other sectors. Any satisfaction, however, with what has been achieved must be tempered by the

recognition that we still have far to travel in meeting the challenges both of quality, and of inequality, within and between nations.