

SPEECHES AT THE OPENING CEREMONY

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Mr. James Eedle
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Address

by

Mr. V. Chukwuemeka Ike,
Registrar,
West African Examinations Council.

Commissioner for Education, Sport and Culture, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

When I was a schoolboy I used to look at my atlas and see the spread of countries round the globe. From that time until very recently I have thought of Australia as being at the other end of the world. As we began to make the arrangements for this Seminar, however, I discovered that there are countries further away from West Africa than Australia. Some of us here today have come from Australia, and some even from beyond Australia, while some like me have had to cover only a short flight of stairs from the second floor of this building to this Conference hall. We represent the developed Commonwealth as well as the developing Commonwealth. We come from big countries and small, we represent all the regions of the Commonwealth, including Europe; the Caribbean; South Asia; South East Asia; the Pacific; East, Central and Southern Africa; and West Africa. Some of the participants are the nominees of Governments or of their organisation - they are the people who tend to be blamed for everything that goes wrong with the educational system. Also here, though, there are selected individuals and others involved in examining at international, regional and national levels. Some of us represent the consumers of examinations - pupils, teachers, parents and employers; some represent the teachers who produce the guinea pigs for the new procedures developed by examinations councils; some of us here, I understand, regard external examinations as an unfortunate and undesirable appendage of education; some of us are university dons, including curriculum or planning experts who from their research centres seek to diagnose the ailments of the public examinations system.

The West African Examinations Council, which I represent, offered to play host to the Seminar and to do so as part of the activities to mark the 21st anniversary of the Council's foundation. In the developing Commonwealth we are described as the largest and the oldest regional examinations council. Having been set up to determine what examinations are in the public interest and to conduct such examinations and award diplomas and certificates on them, there is hardly any level of human endeavour in which our examinations do not feature. We do, however, recognise that age and size are not necessarily synonymous with efficiency or proficiency. We are as well aware that the Council cannot rest satisfied with its established procedures. At 21, we are only just cutting our umbilical cords and emerging into other worlds'. Rather we regard our coming of age as a time for serious self appraisal, conscious of the fact that the public we serve is becoming less gullible than it used to be, and that we owe a great deal to that public.

When we proposed to the Commonwealth Secretariat to conduct a Commonwealth Conference on public examinations it was because we envisaged that such a Conference would be of immense benefit to us as an aid to our reappraisal of our role and our methods. We come to the Seminar to make

whatever humble contribution we can, but more importantly to learn from the experiences of our colleagues in other parts of the Commonwealth whose problems may, or may not, be closely similar to ours. I am sure that even the representatives of the oldest examining boards present here share the attitude that the old have a lot to learn from the young, bearing in mind that no country or organisation can claim to have evolved the ideal system of education. It is by continuous experimentation that we approach the ideal.

We are grateful to the Commonwealth Secretariat for convening this Seminar and to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation for providing funds to enable many of the participants to attend. We are grateful to the Government of Ghana for allowing the Seminar to be held in its territory and to you, Commissioner, for accepting to open this formally at extremely short notice. We, the participants, wish to do our best to achieve the purpose of the Seminar and I hope each of us, through sharing in the wealth of experience assembled here, will leave the Seminar wiser and more capable.

Address

by

Mr. J.H. Eedle,
Commonwealth Secretariat.

Commissioner for Education, Sport and Culture, Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

May I first of all apologise for the absence of the Assistant Commonwealth Secretary-General, Dr. James Maraj, who has been prevented by illness from coming here today. He telephoned on Thursday afternoon to apologise and to ask that the meeting should continue in its original form in his absence. We in the Secretariat are most grateful to Mr. Ike, Registrar of the West African Examinations Council, that he has at short notice been able to take over as Chairman of the meeting. I am grateful, too, that Dr. Maraj found it possible to send another member of the Commonwealth Secretariat staff to help out; Miss Elodie Bissessar, for many years the Principal of the Government Training College in Trinidad, will be a valuable asset to us in our work.

We are particularly grateful to the West African Examinations Council that they should have taken the initiative in proposing a planning meeting on public examinations. We are happy, too, that the Government of Ghana was agreeable to the meeting being situated here, the home of the oldest and largest international examining council in the developing countries of the Commonwealth. Nor would the meeting have been possible without funds from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, a multilateral fund into which all Commonwealth Governments pay in order to promote development in the emerging Commonwealth countries. On my own behalf, Sir, may I say how glad I am to be back in Accra where I spent three very happy years indeed. I am always happy to return from time to time and renew my friendships. And so to the substance of the meeting; why are we here and why are we here now?

At the Fifth Commonwealth Education Conference which took place in Canberra just two years ago, considerable concern about the whole nature, form and effects of examinations was expressed and the Commonwealth Secretariat was asked to do something about it. We have not had an opportunity to concentrate in this area until now, when the initiative taken by the WAEC has made it possible for us to enter this field. I think that it is a very interesting comment and an indication of the general concern that nobody who was invited to this meeting refused to come. All the countries, all the individuals who were asked to be here have arrived with the exception of two, whom I am afraid are caught up in an airline strike in India; we hope that they will be here later. The whole question of examinations is a matter of deep concern to Governments and to individuals throughout the Commonwealth, both in the rich countries and the poor countries. As you heard earlier from Mr. Ike, within the Commonwealth we have a population of nearly 900 million and about half of them are under the age of 25; in some of our countries a quarter of the population is under the age of five. Virtually all these people come within the orbit of examinations as candidates, teachers, parents, employers, administrators or government officers. Not infrequently the same individual plays more than one role.

We should bear in mind that many governments are spending up to a quarter of their annual recurrent revenue on formal educational systems in which it is not unusual for half the children to drop out before the end and for only half of the age group to be in the schools in the first place. Not very long ago it was reported that in India one quarter of the budget was spent on children who died before the age of 16. When we talk about education, therefore, we are talking about the effect of a very considerable proportion of a country's wealth. Governments throughout the Commonwealth are under pressure, particularly from parents who see education as a means of giving their children a quality of life that they themselves have not been able to achieve. And yet education, formal education, school education, is giving rise to increasing disillusion. As more people gain more qualifications, the threshold of competence rises; you need a higher education qualification now to obtain a particular sort of job than you did ten years ago, not because the demands of the job have increased, but because more people are available with higher qualifications from whom employers may choose. Investing in your children's education now, therefore, does not give the same returns as it did even ten years ago. We are, I think, subject to what we might call "academic inflation"; in that you need more qualifications to buy the same amount of employment. Education is seen by many people as the means to qualify, to get a job, and if there is no job at the end, this can give rise to extremely articulate and intelligent frustration. As we have said in one of our reports on youth and development, education in many countries may open a window on the world while leaving the door firmly shut.

The Heads of Commonwealth Governments at their meeting in 1969 and again in 1971 asked the Commonwealth Secretariat to investigate the whole relationship between education and employment opportunities. We organised a number of regional meetings in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Malta and Cyprus. Eventually, last month in Lusaka, we brought together representatives at Ministerial level from all Commonwealth countries. They decided to implement a Commonwealth Youth Programme. In this programme we are thinking of the needs of youth not only in the sense of recreation but also in the sense of preparing young people for the conditions which are likely to obtain in their working life. And I think that here it is very important to remember, Sir, that the children of ten years of age whom we now see around are going to be members of the national work force until the year 2025. We are not talking about an indefinite future, we are talking about children who are already in primary school or, in some cases, who have already failed to find places in primary school. It is their future we are looking at.

We are beginning to realise that education and training alone are not enough, that even technical education or vocational education will not of themselves create employment, that they need to be linked with an integrated development plan, an integrated programme which will prepare people for such employment opportunities as are likely to exist. One of our countries, Sir, it has been said, started a course for sign painters; there are now enough sign painters to put a sign on every tree in the forest, and they don't need that number of sign painters. What we are here for is to see how better forms of selection, testing, measurement and production can be brought to the service of Governments and peoples in order to make the maximum use of the manpower which is available. When we talk about public examinations, we are thinking not only of school examinations, but also of trade testing, of examinations in commerce and industry, of public service commissions, of professional examinations. We are not here in order to conduct a programme of academic research. We do not intend to be a talking-shop but a more strategic planning

meeting. In order to be able to advise governments and other institutions we must seek to define programmes that can be implemented in the context of conditions as they are and not as we would like them to be.

The members of this meeting, Sir, are here in their individual capacities, they are here as professionals and not as government delegates. We hope that one advantage of this will be to inspire perhaps a greater degree of frankness than might be obtained if they had to defend particular policies and situations. The Report of this meeting will not carry the names of those making particular points. We hope this, too, Sir, will encourage frankness in our discussion.

What will happen to the Report when it is completed? We hope that it will not be filed away and forgotten. In accordance with Commonwealth Secretariat practice it will be circulated to all our member governments. It will be laid before the Commonwealth Specialist Conference on Teacher Education which takes place in Nairobi next month and we hope in the near future to begin to implement some of the recommendations. It will also go before the Sixth Commonwealth Education Conference which is to take place in Jamaica in a year's time. I should perhaps stress here that it is not in any way intended that the Secretariat should duplicate the activities of other agencies. We are not the rivals of any other agencies, particularly the United Nations and its specialised agencies, with whom we co-operate very closely and whose observer we are particularly pleased to see here today.

We are indeed glad to be here in association with the 21st Anniversary Celebrations of the WAEC. We hope in the course of our work to demonstrate how international co-operation can supplement and reinforce those aims of self-reliance which characterize not only Ghana but an increasing number of developing countries in the Commonwealth. As I think the Chairman of the National Redemption Council said over the weekend, Sir, "self reliance need not mean isolation". No country today remains unaffected by events and situations beyond its boundaries. No country, I believe, can any longer expect to solve its national problems nationally. I hope, and I know that in this I am speaking for the Commonwealth Secretary-General, that this meeting on a topic of deep concern to all of us anxious for the future health and development of all our members may serve to inspire mutual help and self-help for the benefit of all.

Opening Address

by

Lt. Col. P.K. Nkegbe,
Commissioner for Education, Culture and Sports,
Republic of Ghana.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour and a great pleasure to have been invited to deliver the opening address to this Commonwealth Planning Seminar on Public Examinations. On behalf of the Chairman of the National Redemption Council and the Government of Ghana, and on my own behalf, I wish to welcome you all to this important Seminar. It is my sincere hope that your formal deliberations will not only be successful but will also permit of opportunities for informal discussion, which, I believe, is a very valuable concomitant of a seminar such as this. I also hope that you will all enjoy your rather short stay in Ghana, and that you will be able to make fruitful and rewarding contacts in and out of the hall of the Seminar.

I deem it my privileged duty to extend an especial welcome to our distinguished participants who have come from outside Ghana. They are, one and all, persons of outstanding merit in the field of education. I am particularly happy to note that one or two of their number have had a long association with the West African Examinations Council and did play a significant and germinal role in the formative years of the Council. It is indeed a cause for deep satisfaction to me that, in spite of the over-burdened work schedules of our guest participants, they have been able to accept the invitation of the Commonwealth Secretariat to make available to this Seminar the benefit of their rich store of expertise and experience.

I would also like to express my appreciation of what must undoubtedly have been the enormous preparatory work put in by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the West African Examinations Council in making possible this august assembly of educationists. The decision taken by the Commonwealth Secretariat to promote this Seminar and the kind consent of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Assistance to fund this Seminar - in spite of its exiguous resources, are, to me, further recognition of the potential contribution which the Commonwealth can make in the attempts of member countries to resolve some of the major problems facing up today.

A meeting of this nature, with our Commonwealth colleagues, is important, not only because it provides an excellent opportunity for mutual consultation and co-operation in a field of endeavour which has far-reaching consequences for all countries, but it also helps to promote goodwill, mutual trust and confidence among Commonwealth countries. It is my earnest hope that whatever the varying political and economic patterns that may evolve with time, the Commonwealth link, as a viable dimension of functional utility, co-operation and inter-dependence, will remain as something special. It is also my hope that this link will continue to stand, as an example and as a monument, to all, to the realistic recognition that the best hope for the future of mankind resides in mutual assistance and co-operation across the frontiers of geography, race and persuasion.

I am happy to note that this Seminar represents yet another manifestation of the already existing and fruitful inter-continental dialogue and co-operation between our examining councils here in Africa. I am confident that efforts in this desirable direction will increase to the mutual advantage of all of us.

I do wish to use this occasion to express deep appreciation for the support and assistance which our examining councils have been generously given by sources and agencies outside the Commonwealth. I should like here to thank the United States Agency for International Development, the American Institutes for Research and the Ford Foundation for the assistance which they have given to the building, within our examining councils, of research institutions capable of carrying out large-scale test development and research, and for the support which they have given to projects for the research and development necessary to introduce large-scale objective-testing programmes for manpower selection and for the assessment of educational achievement.

These examples of international co-operation and support in this vital aspect of education as, indeed, in other fields of educational endeavour, reinforce our conviction that with the phenomenal expansion of the educational enterprise and its attendant problems, the burden of research has become so heavy that the path of wisdom lies in the sharing of this burden, on an increasing scale, among countries in the educational common market, for the mutual benefit of all.

In this light, we are particularly happy to welcome this Seminar for the further opportunity it affords for international co-operation in educational research; for the opportunity it affords to educational experts from various countries to meet together to train a lens with a wide angle of vision and critical acuity on pressing educational problems; and for the real promise it holds forth for the development of significant educational change that will bring our systems and content of education into much closer harmony with the demands of today and the socio-economic imperatives that can be expected in the near future.

We, in this country, are currently engaged in a search for educational reforms that will have greater meaning and relevance to our task of national reconstruction. What is happening here on the educational front is a reflection of what is happening concurrently in almost every country in the world. The role which should be played by constant test research and development for the construction, not only of more refined and discriminating instruments of assessment, but, more importantly, of innovative evaluative procedures in support of changes in educational objectives, changes in educational content, and shifts of emphasis in instructional goals and methods, is self-evident and crucial. And the role which administratively effective and research-oriented examining bodies should play in the provision of this kind of support to effect meaningful educational change is of the first and critical importance.

We therefore feel greatly encouraged to note the efforts being made by our examining council to re-organise their administrative structures to achieve optimum efficiency and effectiveness. We also feel a sense of satisfaction to note that even though the load of public examinations everywhere is ever-increasing, the re-organisational efforts of our examining bodies have been producing remarkable dividends. It is our confident hope that they

will continue, in the future, to provide the opportunities for educational development and advance into new areas in response to changing needs, and that their efforts in the direction of community involvement and consultancy activities will continue to register greater impact in the service of education.

The outcome of this Seminar, the objective of which is to prepare the frame-work for a possible sequential series of Commonwealth regional training seminars, should be of inestimable value to the efforts of our examining bodies to become more effective not only in the administration of public examinations, but also in the achievement of educational goals.

This is a Planning Seminar on public examinations; and it is unique in being the first of its kind in Commonwealth educational circles. Its terms of reference pertain to very crucial issues relating to the whole field of public examinations. This Seminar is the first step which, depending to a very great extent on the results of your deliberations here, will not only lead to a comprehensive Commonwealth Conference on Public Examinations, but is capable of having very far-reaching, and even revolutionary, impact on educational change and modernisation. I am confident, Mr. Chairman, that the wealth of experience and expertise at the disposal of this Seminar will be used constructively to make this first step a historic step.

I am informed, Mr. Chairman, that you are all here at this Seminar in a private capacity without "official" constraints. This is as should be. I am confident, therefore, that you are going to face the issues before your honestly and squarely through a free and frank exchange of ideas and experiences. I wish to express my sincere wishes for the success of this Seminar and look forward to hearing about your deliberations.