

Addresses

1. Address by His Excellency Mr. Shridath Ramphal, *Commonwealth Secretary-General*

It is our special privilege, Mr President, to have you with us today. It is a privilege enhanced by your deep personal interest in education and your decision to be yourself custodian of the portfolio for higher education. Your personal commitment and involvement is symbolic of the support which Sri Lanka has given to the Commonwealth over the years in so many different fields. And not only to the Commonwealth; the long tradition of Sri Lanka as a centre for international conferences is testimony to this country's ethic of internationalism and its vitality within the community of nations. And it is a tradition in which you have yourself played a notable part. It was three decades ago that you contributed so significantly, at the memorable meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers held in this capital city, to the creation of the Colombo Plan, that pioneering exercise in international co-operation for development.

The ten-year cycles in which we are accustomed to mark the passage of history provide convenient points to take stock of our experience and get bearings for the future. One thing that is clear as we start the eighties is that we do so with a remarkable lack of confidence about what they hold for each and all of our several societies.

Certainly, the experience of the last few decades has led us to question, and even to discard, some of the received wisdom which guided us in the past. Education has not been exempt from this challenge to once-accepted dogma. Simple faith in the social benefits of educational investment has been an early casualty. Our resolve to respond to the moral compulsion to treat education as a basic right of all people remains undimmed, and indeed it should, but our confidence that education will automatically promote development has been eroded.

We have learned that education, when it is not geared to the needs of real development and when it is not accompanied by progress in other spheres, can lead more to despair than to development, more to frustration than to fulfilment, and more to social tension than to social advance. The loss of faith in the conventional certitudes has given rise to a whole range of questions, about the suitability of inherited models, about curriculum reform and the role of examinations, about orienting education towards employment, about the relative priority to be given in investment to the three layers of the education structure.

There is discussion as to how education systems designed to produce recruits primarily for the modern sector of national economies - for the

bureaucracy, the professions and commerce - can be reformed to serve the advancement of the traditional sector. There is questioning about the appropriateness of a structure in which the lower tiers have no self-sufficient objectives but serve mainly to qualify their products for entry into the next higher tier. There is concern about the value systems which education seems to strengthen, and which make young people prefer white collar to blue collar jobs, office to factory, factory to farm and town to country, and to think that: "All that is rural is bad, all that is urban is better, all that is foreign is best". There is worry about the inflated respect for paper qualifications - what one writer dubbed the diploma disease - and the role that examinations play in emphasising the value of rote learning as against the development of practical skills and aptitudes.

These are among the issues which clamour for attention from Ministers of Education, but they demand not just educational answers but decisions within the harder domain of politics. They emphasise the need for Ministers of Education, in association with their colleagues in government, to gear education so that it can more effectively reinforce and reflect the thrust of national development policy. These decisions are, of course, made harder by the harshness of the economic weather that now threatens rich and poor alike, underlining our common fragility.

The economic crisis which provides the backdrop for this meeting must sharpen our resolve to find the right answers, for to get them wrong can be more costly now than when conditions are buoyant. And that resolve must extend as well to those issues which arise directly out of short-term economic constraints but have major long-term implications like the future of pan-Commonwealth educational exchange which the matter of overseas students fees has served to highlight. I am confident that the processes of Commonwealth consultation can contribute to finding those right answers if while respecting national prerogatives they build upon the heritage of co-operation which is the special asset of education in the Commonwealth.

I started by recalling, Mr President, your own initiative of 30 years ago that led to the Colombo Plan. It is pertinent today to recall also that two decades have passed since the Commonwealth Trade and Economic Conference held on the initiative of the then Canadian Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker. At the meeting in Montreal in 1958, Commonwealth membership was eleven - only slightly larger than in Colombo a decade earlier - but its enlargement was in sight and in its prospect several African and Caribbean countries joined those already members. With one accord Commonwealth representatives in Montreal stressed their belief in the fundamental importance of education as an indispensable condition of development. They said that the people of the Commonwealth should be able to share as widely as possible in the advantage of education of all kinds and at all levels; they resolved to help one another as much as lay within their power, and they agreed in principle to establish a new scheme of Commonwealth scholarships and fellowships.

Montreal led to the Oxford Conference of Commonwealth Educators in 1959, and Oxford to the first Commonwealth Education Ministers Conference in New Delhi in 1962. The Commonwealth Education Liaison Committee had by then been established. It celebrated 20 years of dedicated practical service to education in the Commonwealth last December. How symbolic, is it not, of the reality of Commonwealth linkages in education that the Committee's Chairman, present with us today, should be Sir Roy Marshall - a son of Barbados and now Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hull?

And the bonds of Commonwealth collaboration for education are a reality of immense significance to education in the Commonwealth and to the Commonwealth itself. They have been forged over the years by the successive conferences of Education Ministers following New Delhi: in Ottawa, Lagos, Canberra, Kingston and Accra. They have been reinforced by the several Specialist Conferences on Rural Education, Teacher Education, Learning and Teaching Materials, and Non-Formal Education held between ministerial consultations. And they are constantly being strengthened by the day to day work of the Secretariat's Education Division in furtherance of the highest purposes of Commonwealth co-operation in education.

At the Oxford Conference 21 years ago the formulation of those purposes included the following assertion: "The free association in the Commonwealth of countries which share a belief in the common principles of justice, a democratic way of life and personal freedom, affords a special opportunity for the pooling of resources. There is an obligation on those with more highly developed educational facilities to help their fellow members. But all races and peoples have made their characteristic contribution to the building up of knowledge, culture and values and all have something to give". I commend those precepts to you. Their fulfilment is not only the rationale of our coming together here in Colombo but of wider import to the vitality of the Commonwealth itself.