Jim Cooper

EDUCATION IN NEW GUINEA

A private research student on New Guinea details how Australia is failing in its Trust obligation to develop education in the Territory.

AUSTRALIA, under Article 8 of the New Guinea Trusteeship Agreement, which it has signed, is committed to the development of education in New Guinea. The record suggests, however, that Australia so far has fallen short of its Trust obligations in this field. This is so, even conceding that educating the New Guineans poses many complexities and difficulties.

After more than 50 years of neglect, the Education Ordinance 1952 gave a basis for real advancement in this field. Amended in 1963, it provided for:

1. The establishment by the Administrator of schools, pre-school and other educational institutions and facilities
2. Compulsory registration, recognition or exemption of all schools conducted by educational agencies other than the Administration
3. The making of grants by the Administration to missions and other educational agencies
4. The conduct of schools by native authorities subject to the approval of the Director of Education
5. The declaration of compulsory attendance of children at schools in specified areas
6. The determination of language or languages of instruction to be used in schools

Provision was made for an Advisory Board and district education committees, to advise the Administration at top and district levels.
The broad objectives of the educational policy were stated to include: the political, economic, social and educational advancement of the peoples of the Territory; a blending of the cultures, and the voluntary acceptance of Christianity in the absence of any indigenous body of religious faith founded on teaching and ritual. The measure of volition in the latter may be assessed from the fact that the overwhelming majority attend mission schools.

There are two types of primary schools, T. and A. schools. The former follows a syllabus specially designed for Territory pupils and the second follows the primary syllabus of NSW. It is claimed that the T. schools reach a standard comparable with the A. schools. The problem of the pupils in absorbing knowledge is greatly accentuated by the fact that all instruction is given in English—to them a foreign language.

The attendance in primary schools (South Pacific Post 10.6.66), was given at 65,000 in Administration schools and 147,000 in mission schools, a total of 212,000 or 46.3 per cent of children of school age. Mr. Ralph, Chief of Division, Primary Education in New Guinea, claimed this to be "a remarkable achievement by any standards." It is only remarkable taking into consideration the attitude of the Department of Territories and the paucity of funds for education.

Despite Mr. Ralph's laudatory remarks the evidence to date shows that the New Guinea people have not been "sold" on education. The World Bank Report contains a graph which they call the Education Pyramid of Primary School Pupils 1963. The base is the preparatory school pupils 45,064 strong and the apex is the VI standard with 4,975 pupils. The "drop out" in the Administrations schools (calculated from World Bank Report table, page 291) is about 50 per cent, and in the mission schools it is approximately 95 per cent.

The former Minister for Territories, Mr. Hasluck, in a plan he brought down in 1962, sought to have 67 per cent of the children of school age attending school by 1967, and to his credit he organised vigorously to achieve this target.

He was replaced at the end of 1963 by the present holder of the office, Mr. C. E. Barnes. In his first budget, the social service grant (education, health, welfare), which was expanding rapidly, was cut. A statement was issued indicating that any areas desiring schools would have to provide the buildings and equipment, and the Administration would then allocate teachers.
Apparently this decision is based on the World Bank Report which stated that the primary schools program was out of balance with the pace of development in other sectors. Then suggesting that the indigenes be induced to provide their own schools, they delivered themselves of this remarkable statement: “If the indigenes are not prepared to construct and maintain a primary school, which is an essential without which they can have little hope of progress, the prospects of fitting or persuading them to assume other responsibilities of a modern society are dim.”

Most other observers would have reasoned that the provision of schools was the first and basic requirement to widen their outlook to the point where other responsibilities came within their purview.

Partly arising from the disastrous ‘drop out’ and partly arising from the hostility of the ‘planter lobby’ who oppose the education of the New Guineans, the secondary schools were trailing behind the primary schools. Steps were taken in 1964-65 to correct this and there has been a rapid rise in enrolments. In 1963 there were 3,800 students in secondary schools and in 1966 this rose to 8,591. This is far from a satisfactory state of affairs, and will continue until it is realised that education in New Guinea has to be approached from a different angle.

When the Europeans settled in New Guinea 80 years ago this was the first contact with the outside world. Each village was an entity of its own and trading was insignificant. In the Euro-Asian-African continents, the introduction of domestic animals and a wide variety of grains and plants provided the basis of the first great division of society from which trade and development arose. The absence of these factors was the reason why New Guinea lagged behind these countries.

The basic essential for New Guinea is the introduction of commercial agriculture and animal husbandry. But this is useless unless the New Guinean knows what it is all about. He must be introduced to new plants and animals, modern methods of agriculture, and the preparation of the products for market. This means education, as a rapid change over from the present society cannot be made, unless the majority knows what it is all about. Further, when the New Guinean sees the value of education in gaining mastery over the means of production there will no longer be the present ‘drop out’.

Education on the cheap is not paying off in the Territory. South Australia which has a comparable school attendance spent
$25 million in 1962-63. The 1964-65 figures given by the Department for Territories for New Guinea was $12.4 million. The special conditions in the Territory require this ratio to be reversed.

In 1963 a Commission on Higher Education in Papua and New Guinea was established under the distinguished leadership of Sir George Currie. This Commission, after a wide examination of education in the Territory, brought down a comprehensive report recommending a university at Port Moresby to be functioning by 1966. The report was delivered to the Minister, Mr. Barnes, on March 26, 1964. The Minister showed his appreciation by delaying its tabling in Parliament to August and then left its establishment in the air. Only widespread protest caused him to make a decision in March 1965. One valuable year was lost. Further, no funds were earmarked for the construction of the buildings, the cost of which had to compete with other capital works in the education vote.

The university opened a preliminary course in 1966 and the first courses will start in 1967. The students, about 80, are temporarily housed in the showground buildings, the Administration College and the Medical School. The Minister states that the first university buildings will be available in 1969.

Apart from a few classes teaching English little is done for the education of adults. The urgency of this is underlined by the importance of making the New Guineans aware of the trends in agriculture, an essential condition for the development of the economy. While it is true that much of this knowledge can be made available over the radio network, the radio should also be used to develop the incentive to achieve literacy in the written word.

It is vital for the success of adult education that it be made available in the mother tongue or, as Dr. Wurm, Professorial Fellow in Linguistics at the Australian National University advises, in a tongue close to their own. Once literacy is gained there would be a general desire to learn English, as English is the language of commerce and communication and therefore will be accepted on that basis.

The problems of education in a social background other than one's own can be observed from a press interview given by Mr. N. Donnison, Senior Lecturer in Education at Balmain Teachers' College and a teacher with long experience in New Guinea. He said: "I have seen native head-masters and teachers. They are quite adequate to hold the fort but that is all.” (Sydney
Sun, May 6, 1966) He goes on to point out that this arises from their social background.

This means that the New Guinean has to learn as an adult all the knowledge that is gained by Europeans by association with their form of society from childhood to maturity. It is this lack of background that makes the New Guinean unsure of himself in our society and the failure of the education system to take this into account is indeed a serious underestimation of the task.

This problem would be greatly lessened if the early primary instruction was given in the vernacular or an associated language with English as a second language. This would tend towards a blending of the cultures giving the student a deeper understanding of the language which is the focal point of the culture.

The key to development of New Guinea is the knowledge and understanding of modern commercial agriculture by the New Guineans. This is an asset which requires education to release it. In modern society large capital expenditure must be made to develop assets. So it is essential that the Government recognises education as a capital cost to New Guinea, and invests large sums to develop this asset.

Pleas of "where is the money to be found?" are hardly convincing. The social priorities in Australia itself are pushed in the wrong direction by capitalist values, as the crisis in education in Australia itself shows.

The vast and growing expenditure on a disastrously wrong Vietnam policy compounds this problem, as well as arousing grave misgivings in New Guinea and elsewhere in South East Asia about the real motives and intentions of the Australian establishment.

SMALL BOUQUETS

COMMENDATION for those responsible for the publication of such an excellent left review.

JIM COCKS, Canada.

THANK YOU very much for sending your valuable journal, Australian Left Review. This is a great help in our work, furnishing a lot of information to increase our knowledge about Australia.

JULIO R. ENRIQUEZ, Havana, Cuba.

THE QUEENSLAND State Committee of the Communist Party yesterday unanimously resolved to congratulate all associated with the production of ALR on the high quality and reader-interest of the publication.

It was felt that the Review is destined to play a most important part in developing unity and understanding among the progressive forces in Australia.

E. A. BACON, Secretary.