THE UNIVERSITIES AND THE GOVERNMENT IN SRI LANKA

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The Universities and the Government in Sri Lanka

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AT the end of the nineteenth century the British colony of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, had a well-developed system of primary and secondary schools but no university. In the early decades of that century the island's most esteemed secondary school, the Colombo Academy supported and directed by the state, was the main if not sole centre for such courses of higher education as existed. Later known as Queen's College it became affiliated to Calcutta University in 1859. Renamed Royal College, it became the first " college "[1] to provide some form of post-matriculate education since it prepared students for the external examinations conducted by the University of London. Few students, however, proceeded beyond the intermediate examination. The children of the wealthier classes were sent to British universities for their education, and the less affluent went to universities in India. Medical education was better provided through the Ceylon Medical College which was established in 1870. In general, however, the island continued to depend on institutions overseas to meet its need for the education of medical personnel as well in the other professions.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was increasing demand by the island's educated classes for the establishment of a university in Ceylon. By the first decade of the twentieth century, this agitation had developed into what came to be known as " the university movement ". The early nationalists regarded a university as essential to " national existence " and vital for the purpose of arresting " the process of denationalisation ". The two outstanding figures in " the university movement " were the great orientalist, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who was the foremost Ceylonese civil servant of his day and who was soon to emerge as one of the outstanding Ceylonese political figures of the first quarter of the present century. The major premise of the arguments of the leading members of the university movement was that external examinations conducted by British universities were a poor substitute for a real university education in an indigenous university.

In the *Ceylon National Review*, the journal of the Ceylon Social Reform League founded in 1905, Coomaraswamy sketched his ideal of a " Sri Lankan University ": an institution which would impart an education and not merely " estimate the amount of knowledge possessed by

[1] The term " college " was used to designate a secondary school which provided post-matriculate classes.

examinees "; one in which students would acquire " culture and independence of thought ", a residential institution which would revitalise and promote indigenous culture and oriental languages, while at the same time providing instruction " in modern science, medicine, commerce and agriculture ".[2] When Arunachalam, as the spokesman of the Ceylon University Association which had been established in 1906, entered the fray he spoke in much the same terms. He too urged the establishment of:

> a university adapted to local needs [which] while making provision for the study of English and the assimilation of western culture [would] take care that our youth do not grow up strangers to their mother tongue and to their past history and traditions. . . . The vernacular literature of the day will then be rescued from its pedantry and triviality and be a worthy vehicle for the dissemination of what is best in western and eastern culture. . . . Then at last the masses of our people will be really influenced for the better by western civilization which seems otherwise likely to leave no enduring mark than the addition of some European words to our vocabulary and the incorporation of some European customs in our social life.[3]

It was taken for granted that the initiative for the establishment of a university in the island should come from the state which would also provide the bulk of the financial resources.

What in the meantime of the attitude of the colonial administration in Ceylon to this demand for the establishment of a university? It was at every stage lukewarm if not ambivalent. In the early stages—the first decade of the twentieth century—the government viewed it as something to be " cautiously but firmly encouraged ", but soon there were second thoughts: " . . . we must avoid the dictates of noisy impetuosity and rhetorical exaggerations and guard above all things against flooding the century with failed B.A.s! "[4] Nonetheless, it was not openly opposed, and, when a subcommittee of the Legislative Council of Ceylon, which was appointed to consider the question, recommended in 1912 that a university be established in a new building designed for Royal College, this received the endorsement of the government. It was only in 1921, however, that the decision was carried out. The delay was partly an inevitable consequence of the outbreak of the First World War; questions relating to the nature of the university and its site needed to be resolved, but in any case this was not regarded a matter of great urgency. What emerged in 1921—the Ceylon University College—was much less than the university for which Coomaraswamy and Arunachalam had agitated. The University College was affiliated to the University of London and prepared students for the external examinations of that university. From the outset the University College of Colombo was treated as nothing more than a half-way house to a national university. The legislation

[2] Quoted in Pieris, Ralph, " Universities, Politics and Public Opinion in Ceylon ", *Minerva*, II, 4 (Summer 1964), p. 441.

[3] *The Journal of the Ceylon University Association*, I, 1 (1906), p. 2.

[4] *The Administration Report of the Director of Public Instruction* (1903), quoted in Pieris, R., *op cit.*, p. 443.

required for its transformation to this higher status was ready in 1925. The Legislative Council decided, in 1927, in favour of locating it in Kandy, and resolved too that the university should be " unitary and residential ".[5] A draft constitution for the university was ready by 1930. All this was soon caught up in a prolonged controversy over the question of where the university should be located. The choice was between a site —or sites—in Colombo and one in or near Kandy. Those who argued that the university should be in the national capital put up a bitter rear-guard action, and it was only in 1938 that they conceded defeat. The University of Ceylon was ultimately established in 1942 but transfer to its site at Peradeniya near Kandy was delayed by wartime conditions.[6]

The Heyday of University Autonomy

The University of Ceylon has, since its inception, been almost totally dependent on the state for its financial support. Though this could have led to demands for state control, or at least to a large measure of influence in the affairs of the University, it was, unlike the University College (1921–42) which it replaced, a genuinely autonomous institution from 1942 to 1966. Until 1958, when the two main centres of Buddhist learning in Ceylon were converted overnight into universities, it was the only university in the island. The idea that a university should be autonomous found wide acceptance among all sections of political opinion in the country, not least with the main officials of the government and the leading intellectuals and economic figures of Ceylonese society. These latter put their trust in Sir Ivor Jennings and took comfort in the thought that, with him as vice-chancellor, the University and university education were in safe and competent hands.

Jennings had begun his career in Ceylon as the principal of University College. In framing the *University of Ceylon Ordinance No. 20 of 1942* which established the University as a unitary, residential institution, he incorporated in it the safeguards required to protect its autonomy. Within the University and outside it, his established academic reputation, buttressed by his influence with D. S. Senanayake, the first prime minister after the country became independent and whose trusted confidential adviser on constitutional affairs he was, gave Jennings a prestige in the country which none of the successors ever enjoyed. As its first vice-chancellor, from 1942 to 1955, he gave the university a style and standing which enabled it to survive with its autonomous status intact, if not entirely inviolate, for a decade after his departure for Cambridge in 1955.

The transfer from the site on Thurstan Road in Colombo to Peradeniya on the banks of the Mahaveli was spread over two decades,

[5] Jennings, Sir W. Ivor, " The Foundation of the University of Ceylon ", *University of Ceylon Review*, IX, 3 (July, 1951), pp. 147–162.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 226–250.

beginning on a modest scale with the faculty of agriculture and the department of law after the end of the Second World War, and accelerating rapidly with the shift of the faculty of arts in 1951–52. At Peradeniya the University had a site of exhilarating scenic beauty which its architects used with remarkable skill as the setting for some elegant buildings designed in the ornate style of the traditional architecture of the region. Had Arunachalam and Coomaraswamy been alive to see the University in its new setting they would have approved enthusiastically of much which Jennings did. They might however have had some misgivings about the opulence of some of the buildings and they probably would have been perturbed by the striking evidence of " anglicism " and the implication that it was an institution for the upper classes. They might well have thought that it was too much of a Cambridge on the Mahaveli.

This tendency to regard itself as a training ground for persons who would become members of the leading strata of Ceylonese society was the inevitable, if not the intended, result of an admissions policy which was conservative if not actually restrictive. On this there was no great difference of opinion between the University and the government of the day. In its report for 1949, the council of the University argued that " since education is at the expense of the state . . . it would be difficult to justify the provision of university education beyond the employment needs of the country ".[7] The report of the council for 1954 was even more emphatic—it envisaged the stabilisation of university admissions to all faculties at around 500 per annum—partly because of restricted accommodation, and partly because it wished to relate the numbers of graduates to the prospects of graduate employment.[8] Indeed those who planned the University never thought in terms of large numbers of students. In 1938 the size they had in mind was a student body of 500 in all; this was raised to 800 and then to 1,000 in 1940. By the time the University was established at Peradeniya the total number of students was well over 2,000. As early as 1950–51, Jennings warned that when this figure reached 3,500 " steps must be taken in Thurstan Road to start a second unit ".[9]

Restrictive though this policy was, it was not without benefit to the newly established University which was given a decade of relatively quiet consolidation to build up a corps of competent teachers, a university tradition, and very high academic standards in its examinations as a result of which the first degrees of the University enjoyed an enviable reputation. At the time Sir Ivor Jennings left in 1955, the University of Ceylon had an established reputation and enormous potential for development into one of the major universities of the new Commonwealth.

[7] Quoted in Jayasuriya, D. L., " Development in University Education: The Growth of the University of Ceylon, 1942–65 ", *University of Ceylon Review*, XXIII, 122 (1965), p. 119.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Jennings, W. I., *op. cit.*, p. 251.

The first rumblings of opposition to the restrictive admissions policy of the University were heard almost simultaneously with the transfer of the faculty of arts to Peradeniya. The University, it was alleged, was far too exclusive, and it admitted too few students. Demands for a reversal of this policy became almost irresistible with the change of government at the general elections of 1956.

The University confronted this challenge under the leadership of Sir Nicholas Attygalle who had succeeded Jennings in 1955. Though he had been professor of obstetrics and gynæcology and dean of the faculty of medicine for over a decade, Attygale's skills, so far as the University was concerned, were political rather than academic. The influence he had in the country owed much to his flourishing medical practice, which in combination with his ties of kinship with the most influential political family of the day, made him a power in the land. He had helped build up the faculty of medicine and this now served as the base from which he won three consecutive five-year terms as vice-chancellor. On the third occasion—December 1964—he was 72 years old. Without his predecessor's breadth of vision or principled commitment to the interests of the University, he drifted along without a policy and at the end of his period of office in October 1966 the academic capital he had inherited was well nigh exhausted.

In the mid-1950s the University of Ceylon faced pressure from the government in regard to two questions: the admission of larger numbers of students, especially in the arts and the social sciences; and the medium of instruction in the universities. In effect these were twin problems, or two facets of the same problem, for the students who were seeking admission in increasing numbers had been educated in Sinhalese and Tamil and expected to be taught in those languages at the University. The response of the University to this pressure could hardly be described as energetic or far-sighted. Because it was a residential university, an increase in the numbers of students was dependent on the expansion of the capacity of its halls of residence—or an increase in the number of such halls—and this was necessarily slow and expensive. As for teaching in the indigenous languages, the vast bulk of the academic staff were either unenthusiastic—because they had serious doubts about what they were being called upon to undertake—or hostile, and it was impossible to get teachers who were both academically qualified and sufficiently competent in Sinhalese and Tamil to fill the gap at short notice.

For the government these problems were too urgent to await solution through negotiations with the University of Ceylon. Hence it was decided to raise the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara *pirivenas*—centres of Buddhist learning—to the status of universities. This decision was an *ad hoc* one, and in the nature of a quick, if not desperate, remedy for

an impossible situation; it was a classic instance of the way not to establish universities. The two new universities began as non-residential liberal arts colleges, teaching in Sinhalese. With their establishment in 1958, the University of Ceylon lost its monopoly over university education. If Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara did not, in practice, enjoy the same autonomy as their better known contemporary, this was not because the ordinance [10] which raised them to the status of universities gave the government any greater control than it had with regard to the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. What happened was that officials in the Ministry of Education used their influence with the *bhikkus*—the Buddhist monks—who were in nominal charge of these universities, to gain control over their administration for their own ends. One needs to distinguish therefore between the principle of state control *per se*, and the particular interests of officials of the Ministry of Education who found in these new universities a rich lode of patronage which they mined with scant regard for academic standards or the public interest.

In the meantime, the University of Ceylon found that the pressure from the government and the public at large for the accommodation of substantially increased numbers of students of arts and social sciences, and for teaching them in Sinhalese or Tamil, was too strong to resist; it gave way on both in the early 1960s. The change with regard to the medium of instruction had at least the merits of being carefully considered and carried out by the University on the basis of a time-table determined by its own council and senate. The increase in the number of students admitted, on the other hand, came in the form of a series of concessions extracted by the government on an *ad hoc* basis with very little concern for the University's capacity to cope with the expansion.

With the first batch of students educated in the vernacular languages expected to enter the faculty of arts in the academic session of 1959–60, governmental pressure on the University to begin teaching in Sinhalese and Tamil increased in intensity. The demands were addressed to the University council. A joint session of the council and the senate was called to discuss the issue. Though its deliberations were informal and the senate outlined the formidable obstacles in the way of taking so momentous a decision—the acute shortage of textbooks fit for use at university level, the need to develop terminology for technical subjects, and the need to recruit academic staff to teach in these languages at a time when the staff available to teach in English was itself far from adequate—political and social insistence prevailed over academic doubts. The University of Ceylon began to teach in Sinhalese and Tamil in the faculty of arts in the early 1960s.

The University of Ceylon began a crucial and unique experiment of

[10] *The Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara University Act, No. 45 of 1958: An Act to make Provision for the Establishment and Regulation of the Vidyodaya University of Ceylon and the Vidyalankara University of Ceylon* (Colombo: The Government Press,, 1959)

imparting instruction in three languages: its staff was required to be able to teach in English and Sinhalese or Tamil. It has been, if nothing else, an extremely expensive experiment since a corps of teachers is maintained for two distinct linguistic streams where, in the past, one had sufficed. Because a teacher did not lecture in both Sinhalese and Tamil, students in each of these linguistic streams were deprived of the benefit of instruction by teachers competent in their field but teaching in the other linguistic medium. Worse still, the lack of a common language has resulted in a sharp division among students drawn unabashedly on ethnic lines since language is the criterion of ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Served by inadequate, old-fashioned and poorly translated textbooks, and without any reasonable competence in English, most students in the arts and social sciences are pathetically and totally dependent on notes taken down at lectures. Those whose academic interest is strong—and there are very few such students in the arts and social sciences—acquire a working knowledge of English through the classes provided by a unit of the English department specialising in the teaching of English as a second language. Technical terms have been coined in rich if somewhat confusing and pedantic profusion, but there is a lack of textbooks in Sinhalese and Tamil for which there is no solution in sight because the market is so small. The situation is somewhat better in medicine, engineering and the sciences. The students in these subjects are generally much more willing to exert themselves to acquire competence in English; in practice, much of the teaching is bilingual—English and Sinhalese or Tamil—if not entirely in English, which is not the case in teaching in the arts and social sciences. As a result, the shortage of Sinhalese and Tamil textbooks, which is just as acute if not more so than in the social sciences, does not pose serious problems for students in the faculties of science, engineering and medicine because of their much greater proficiency in English. There is little doubt that academic standards have declined with the introduction of teaching in the vernacular languages in the arts and social sciences. No dispassionate review has yet been attempted of the impact of teaching in the national languages in the University, and none is likely in the near future for university teaching in the national languages has developed a momentum of its own, and vested interests as well.

From the late 1950s there was an unprecedented—and basically uncontrolled—increase in the size of the student population in the universities, in the arts and social sciences. The new admissions policy of the government of the day was that a "qualified" candidate had a right to a university education. Each of the universities had an entrance examination of its own. Under Sir Nicholas Attygalle, the University of Ceylon yielded to the government's demand that the number of admissions should increase. Though the number of students at the University was now well over 2,500, no attention was paid to planning the "second unit" at

Thurstan Road to which Sir Ivor Jennings had drawn attention in 1950–51; this was a limited objective entirely within the ability of the University. There were, of course, pious exhortations in the council's reports on the need to establish additional universities to cater to the growing demand for university education.

A faculty of medicine was established at Peradeniya in the early 1960s —the second faculty of medicine of the University of Ceylon, as it was called—followed by a faculty of science and a faculty of engineering. The original faculties of medicine and science were retained in Colombo. All these were carefully planned, in sharp contrast to the expansion of the faculty of arts. In 1961, the admissions of students in arts subjects to Peradeniya were doubled to 1,600, half at least of whom were non-residential—they were called "external students"—with a right to attend lectures and a limited right to the use of the library. The position of these "external" students was anomalous in the extreme. They deeply resented their "second-class" status and formed a core of discontented and disgruntled students within the student body. Their admission to the University marked the first breach in the "residential" system at Peradeniya. In 1963 came the next phase in the expansion of the faculties of the arts, with the establishment, at last, of a second unit at Thurstan Road. Confined originally to the larger departments of arts and social science subjects, and teaching only in Sinhalese and for the general degree, it was indeed a "makeshift arrangement designed to cope with the sudden increase in the number of students qualifying for admission to the Arts Faculty". Between 1963 and 1965 the number of students of the University of Ceylon doubled and the proportion of arts students there increased from 43 per cent. in 1959 to 68 per cent. in 1965.[11] Indeed, the rapid growth of the University of Ceylon in the 1960s lay in the faculty of the arts; there was a nearly fourfold increase from 1960—the year of the first admission of students who were to be taught in Sinhalese and Tamil—to 1965.[12] Along with this the number of students at the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara campuses increased steadily. At this stage there were no female students at these two universities.

The admissions policy pursued since the mid-1950s was reduced to absurdity in 1965 when the Ministry of Education demanded that the University of Ceylon increase to 8,000 the number of students admitted to the faculty of arts at Peradeniya and Colombo for the academic session of 1965–66. The number admitted in the previous year had been 1,800. Far from protesting against this stupefying demand, Sir Nicholas Attygalle, as vice-chancellor, came up, on his own initiative, with a proposal

[11] Jayasuriya, D. L., *op. cit.*, pp. 111–112.

[12] When the student bodies of Vidyadya and Vidyalankara are included, the maldistribution between the various faculties in the three universities was even more marked; 77·5 per cent. of all students were in the faculties of arts. See, National Council of Higher Education, *Report of the National Council of Higher Education for the Year, 1966–67* (Colombo: National Council of Higher Education, 1967), p. 86.

to establish three campuses of the University of Ceylon at Galle, Kurunegala and Jaffna—150, 30 and 200 miles from Peradeniya respectively—each to admit students for study only in the faculty of arts and to do this within three months. It was a hastily composed scheme drawn up without any serious consideration of its financial implications, its impact on the harmonious functioning of the Peradeniya campus, or on the future of the University. When it was discovered that a serious—and very suspicious—error had crept into the computation of marks required to gain admission to the University, the cabinet overruled both the Ministry of Education and the council of the University of Ceylon and insisted on the maintenance of the entrance requirements of previous years. The plan for the three campuses were jettisoned unceremoniously. But so much publicity had been given to this figure of 8,000 that there was no possibility of continuing with the entrance requirements of previous years. Instead the number of admissions of students to the University of Ceylon was fixed at nearly 4,000, more than double that of previous years, and the racecourse at Colombo—in conveniently close proximity to the university buildings at Thurstan Road—was taken over to accommodate this phenomenal increase in numbers. The acquisition of the racecourse was yet another improvisation.

The admissions to the arts and social sciences for the academic session of 1965–66 amounted in all to 3,930, an increase of 2,105 students over the corresponding figure for the previous year. Of these students no less than 2,904 were admitted to the Thurstan Road unit; in the previous year the number admitted there had been 743.

Throughout the years 1956 to 1965 but more specifically after 1960, the universities lost control over the vitally important sphere of the admission of students. Since there was no equivalent of the University Grants Committee of the United Kingdom to take a long-term view, the controversial question of admission of students to the universities and in particular to the University of Ceylon was discussed only at a brief meeting conducted annually without reference to any long-term plans. Indeed, neither the government nor the University of Ceylon had any! The University of Ceylon had made no alternative proposals, and was usually persuaded to accept the government's views on the subject of admission without any compensating benefits to the University in the form of an enhancement of its grant commensurate with its vastly expanded admission of students. Indeed, the sums made available for each student declined steadily. In 1960 the government grant was Rs. 9·56 million for 3,181 students, with an average of Rs. 3,007 per student. In 1961 it was Rs. 9·12 million for 3,684 students, an average of Rs. 2,476 per student. In 1962 the total grant was Rs. 9·5 million for 4,655 students, an average of Rs. 1,986 per student. In 1963 the grant was Rs. 9·9 milion for 5,117 students, an average per student of Rs. 1,935. In 1964 the grant was Rs. 12·2 million for 5,706 students, an average per student of

Rs. 2,133. In 1965 the grant was Rs. 12·9 milion for 7,182 students, the average being Rs. 1,791 per student; and in 1966 the grant was Rs. 15 million for 10,723 students, with an average of only Rs. 1,391 per student. In 1966 the average grant per student at Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara was Rs. 1,133 and Rs. 748 per student respectively.[13]

With the universities in this submissive mood, it is remarkable that their autonomous status was not threatened more often or with greater persistence, and that the government's demands on the universities were limited to the two issues we have discussed above. The explanation for this seems to lie in the events of 1960–61 in the field of primary and secondary education, when the great bulk of the denominational schools were brought under state control. Primary and secondary education was now the responsibility, in the main, of the state. (A small group of private schools survived, but they were active mainly in trying to protect themselves from extinction.) The administrative resources of the Ministry of Education were stretched for a year or two to cope with the sudden expansion of its responsibilities. As a result its officials had less time than they might otherwise have had to begin a systematic encroachment on the autonomy of the universities. There was no single administrative unit or division within the Ministry with special responsibility for formulating plans of higher education or indeed for maintaining any formal links with the universities.[14]

By 1964 plans were afoot for greater control over the universities by the Ministry. The target in fact was the University of Ceylon.[15] Officials of the Ministry always had informal but effective control over Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara. These plans were put into effect in mid-1966 with a new government in power and under a controversial and different Minister of Education, I. M. R. A. Iriyagolla.

The Beginnings of State Control

The Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966 marked the start of a more organised system of state interference with university education in Sri Lanka. This ordinance was introduced as a remedy for some deep flaws in tertiary education in the island. Among the deficiencies specified by the Ministry of Education were: student indiscipline, inefficient administrative arrangements within the universities, and in general a lack of co-ordina-

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[14] The only formal link was that the director of education was an *ex officio* member of the university council.

[15] Few universities in the world had been reported on by commissions of inquiry more often than the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. The Ministry had before them two such reports: *The Report of the Ceylon University Commission: Sessional Paper XXIII of 1959* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1959), and the *Report of the University Commission, 1962: Sessional Paper XVI of 1963* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1962–63). The latter was a damning indictment of the administration of Sir Nicholas Attygalle. This was followed in 1966 by a *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Peradeniya University Students' Strike: Sessional Paper III of 1966* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1966).

tion of the teaching programmes of the various universities. Some of these problems, especially the endemic student indiscipline and the regular eruptions of violence, were the inevitable consequence of increasing student numbers with indifference to the adequacy of staff, buildings and libraries in the universities. The primary responsibility for this state of affairs lay with the Ministry of Education. Charges of maladministration and waste of public funds were levelled in the main against the new universities, but interference by officials of the Ministry in appointments and in the day-to-day conduct of these universities had contributed in no small measure to the faults to which the officials of the Ministry drew attention in the course of their campaign. Protests against this ordinance came thick and fast. Opposition to the bill within the ruling party in parliament succeeded in postponing its introduction for a few months; this gave the universities time to prepare their counter-attack and to make representations for the elimination of what they regarded as the more obnoxious features of the bill. They were given a second such opportunity when the Prime Minister decided to place the ordinance before a select committee of the House of Representatives. Though some of the more controversial features of the bill were deleted, the general principles embodied in it were not substantially altered. The Minister of Education and his officials won the day for many reasons. University opinion was divided, and especially crucial in this regard was the splitting of the academic staff into factions in the University of Ceylon; these factions were formed about the personality of Sir Nicholas Attygalle. Some sections within the academic staff regarded the prospect of increased interference by officials of the Ministry in the University as a small price to pay if it could at the same time bring to an end the autocratic career of the ageing Sir Nicholas Attygalle. The academic staff of the two new universities were in no position to act effectively and the drift of public opinion in the country was in favour of greater governmental control over the universities.

The key feature of the new structure was a National Council of Higher Education of nine members, which had a range of functions well beyond those normally performed by a university grants committee following the pattern obtaining in the United Kingdom.[16] This deviation from that pattern was a deliberate act of policy. Accordingly the first draft of the ordinance, the chairman and all its members were to be appointed by the Ministry of Education. An official of the Ministry of Education was an *ex-officio* member as were the vice-chancellors, but the latter unlike the ministerial representative had no vote. The Minister of Education was entitled under the act to issue " directions " to the National Council of Higher Education which was under an obligation to carry them out.

Academic opinion was critical of these proposals. The academics were

[16] For the powers of the National Council of Higher Education, see Appendix A, p. 271.

critical of the provision whereby the National Council was to have the power to present a list of candidates for appointment to a vice-chancellorship with the power of appointment to rest with the Minister. They were also critical of the proposed power of the Minister to appoint all the non-university members of the boards of regents. Nor did they like the proposal that the National Council should have the power—for one year—to review all appointments made to the staff of universities and to dismiss those appointees whom they found not to be academically qualified for the posts to which they were appointed. The provision that all appointments made outside the framework of accepted terms of reference should in the future have the approval of the National Council was also distasteful to them. They did not like any of these provisions but they were willing to accept the latter two provisions which gave the National Council powers " introduced to suit the local academic environment ". They did not like the first two provisions either, but they preferred that the powers they assigned should be in the hands of the National Council rather than in the hands of the Minister. Nonetheless, rather than concentrate their fire on these, they directed their attack against the Minister's powers in dealing with the proposed National Council of Higher Education, his right to appoint its members and the range of the " directions " he was entitled to issue. In the final version of the act, it was the Governor-General and not the Minister who was to appoint the members of the National Council of Higher Education, a change in form rather than substance since the Governor-General would act on the advice of the Minister on these matters. There was greater satisfaction in academic circles in regard to the change in the Minister's power of issuing " general " or " special written directions ". The strongest objection was to the " special " directions. The Ministry shrewdly dropped the word " written " along with " special " and the second version of the draft read " general directions ", but in the final version the word " written " was restored after " general ".

The original version of the act gave the Minister a wide range of powers in academic matters within universities. His prior approval was required for the establishment of new posts and new faculties, for ordinances drafted by the universities for the creation of academic departments within a faculty, and for the affiliation of a university with other institutions. The age of retirement of teachers was fixed at 62, but in the case of professors their services could be extended to 65 with the approval of the Minister. The Minister was also the final point of appeal in regard to compulsory retirement and dismissal of university staff. In the second, and in the final version of the act, the Minister either yielded all these powers completely, or, as in the case of the establishment of the faculties and departments, shared them with the National Council of Higher Education. The Minister's power to extend the services of professors beyond the age of retirement was deleted, and

the National Council of Higher Education, not the Minister, became the final authority in regard to compulsory retirement and dismissals.

University opinion regarded the right to elect the vice-chancellor as an integral element in university autonomy. Up to 1966, he was elected by a university court in which the overwhelming majority of members were university teachers. *The Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966* changed all that; the vice-chancellor was to be appointed by the Minister whose choice was limited to one of five names submitted to him by the National Council of Higher Education. Much of the opposition to this act stemmed from this change but the government—not merely the Ministry of Education—was inflexible on this. They argued—and on this public opinion was with them—that the election to vice-chancellorship had been the crucial factor in the factionalism which was rampant within the universities. The only change made in the final version was to confine the Minister's choice to one of three nominees of the National Council of Higher Education. Besides, the Minister was given a free hand with regard to the first vice-chancellor to be appointed after the act came into effect. In the case of the University of Ceylon, the Minister chose a senior civil servant, much to the dismay of the university teachers who believed he had deliberately slighted them in his disregard of the claims of senior professors.

The registrars of the universities—they were called secretaries under the new act—were also appointed by the Minister and for these positions he chose officials from the Ministry of Education. These officials were generally treated with considerable suspicion within the universities. None of them left much of a mark on the administration of the universities and it is doubtful whether they ever achieved any success in their intended role as watch-dogs on behalf of the Ministry of Education.

The members of the governing council of universities—boards of regents as they were called—were appointed by the National Council of Higher Education. Their nominees formed a clear majority in the board and the academic representatives—the deans elected by the faculties—were very much like the vice-chancellor within the National Council of Higher Education, with a right to a voice within the National Council but not a vote. This inferior status of the deans was a ground for opposition to the act, but on this too, no concession was forthcoming.

In retrospect, however, the National Council of Higher Education and the boards of regents appointed by them protected what remained of the autonomy of the universities from encroachment by the Ministry of Education far more effectively and with much greater dedication and conviction than their successors of the 1970s. It was feared that ministerial directives to the National Council of Higher Education would flow in rapid succession and that, with the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Education in an influential role within the National Council of Higher Education, that body would be easily subordinated to the Ministry of

Education. In practice this did not happen. The members of the National Council of Higher Education asserted their independence and were seldom intimidated by the Minister or his officials. In fact the National Council of Higher Education proved to be a more efficient buffer against ministerial interference in university affairs than the advocates of the new machinery of control anticipated. The boards of regents, for their part, were more independent of the National Council of Higher Education than the critics of the new arrangements had expected. Most of these "regents" were men of considerable achievement in their own spheres of activity and they discharged their duties with a keen regard for the interests of the universities.[17]

Among the achievements of the National Council of Higher Education in its period of office from 1966 to 1970 were the preparation, for the first time, of long-term plans for tertiary education, and the establishment of some uniformity of standards and procedures in regard to appointments to university posts, and in the terms and conditions of service of university staff. All of this was done after close consultation with university teachers. It also established a central admissions bureau to co-ordinate admissions to the universities[18]; it founded a College of Advanced Technology on the outskirts of Colombo and a new university based on the Colombo units of the University of Ceylon. The appointment of the first lay vice-chancellors of Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara was also one of their accomplishments.

With the passage of time the National Council of Higher Education became in fact a university grants committee on the British model, but this did not soften the opposition of the vast majority of university teachers to it, or to the *Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966*. What they wanted was a return to the *status quo* before 1966. In addition, the

[17] The appointed members of the National Council of Higher Education in 1966–67 were as follows: Professor G. P. Malalasekera, one-time dean of the Oriental faculty, diplomat and Buddhist scholar, chairman; Dr. E. W. Adikaram, educationist with an unusual background of academic interests in Oriental languages and modern sciences; W. A. de Silva, in his earlier years member of the distinguished Ceylon Civil Service, and later Member of Parliament and businessman; Dr. M. C. M. Kaleel, medical practitioner and one time cabinet minister; T. P. de S. Munasinghe, an eminent engineer; Dr. H. A. Passe, emeritus professor of English at Peradeniya; W. A. Perera, educationist, philanthropist and one time Member of Parliament; N. Sinnetamby, former puisne judge; and W. Thalagodapitiya, a former commissioner of assizes. They were appointed in October 1966. In 1967 they were joined by M. C. Sansoni, former chief justice, who replaced W. A. de Silva.

Though the Minister had some support within the National Council of Higher Education, by and large he could not and did not have his way except by persuasion.

Members of the boards of regents were much the same sort of men. Among the regents at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, for example, were men of the calibre of L. A. Weerasinghe, former auditor-general; Dr. W. G. Wickremasinghe, one time head of the medical service; C. X. Martyne, one time district judge, businessman and later Member of Parliament; N. J. L. Jansz, a member of the Ceylon Civil Service and later high commissioner in Australia; M. Rajendra and G. V. P. Samarasinghe, both permanent secretaries at the time of their service on the board; and Dr. G. Ponnamperuma, a distinguished administrator of scientific research.

[18] Each university had each its own entrance examination or requirements up to the establishment of this bureau. Thereafter a uniform system was introduced.

personality of the then Minister of Education, I. M. R. A. Iriyagolla, contributed greatly to sustaining the opposition of the academics to the act and everything and everybody associated with it. He invariably responded tactlessly to harmless criticisms of his policies.

University opinion believed that " [the *Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966*] transformed universities . . . into ignoble colonies of the Ministry of Education, and some university administrators into conspicuous satraps of the imperial presence in Malay Street [the headquarters of the Ministry] . . . [and] virtually converted universities into government departments. . . ." [19]

It was in this mood that university teachers threw their weight behind the oppositional United Front in the electoral campaign of 1970. The election manifesto of the United Front promised to repeal the higher education Act; to establish a university grants committee; to assure " full academic freedom "; and to restore university autonomy. The promises in this manifesto were embodied in the new government's first speech from the throne following its overwhelming victory in May 1970. The academic community looked to the future in pleasant anticipation of the fulfilment of these promises, and there were great hopes of a more harmonious relationship between the government and the universities, especially because a university teacher was appointed permanent secretary to the Ministry of Education. What was expected was a reversal of some of the trends established in the years 1966–70. What in fact happened between 1970 and 1977 was the consolidation of governmental control of the universities.

The State Calls the Tune: 1970 to 1977

Between its decisive victory at the general elections of May 1970 and the outbreak of the insurrection of April 1971, the government formed by the United Front made an honest attempt to re-define the relationship between the Ministry of Education and the universities in keeping with their pledges on higher education in their electoral manifesto. In the first week of April 1971 a new ordinance on the universities was tabled before the House of Representatives. It made provision for a university grants committee and for the restoration of some of the features of university government abolished in the *Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966*; it restored the election of the vice-chancellor and the full voting rights of deans. It also stipulated the representation of students in university government at every level, and similar representation for the auxiliary staff of the universities. This ordinance was quickly abandoned in the aftermath of the insurgency which broke out on the day after it was tabled in parliament. The prospect of a more harmonious relationship between the universities and the government vanished almost as soon as it appeared.

[19] University of Ceylon Teachers' Association (Peradeniya), press statement on " University Reorganisation ", published in August 1972 as a pamphlet.

The government's attitude to the universities changed almost overnight to one of distrust and hostility, on the discovery that the insurgents had converted the halls of residence in the universities, but especially those at Peradeniya, into stores for the collection and manufacture of bombs. The government charged that the university administration had watched helplessly while the campuses had become a threat to the security of the state. The indignation of the government was unjustifiable since it was its own policies which had made it impossible for the university administration to restrain the student radicals on the campuses engaged in the production and storing of bombs. After the electoral victory of 1970, a senior member of the cabinet had visited the campus and promised that the police would never again be allowed to enter the campus. At Peradeniya, for instance, a combination of radical teachers, radical students and radical members of the auxiliary staff virtually ran the campus. Intelligence reports on the situation at Peradeniya were available to the government but they were disregarded. The universities were made into scapegoats for the government's own tolerance, if not encouragement, of agitation and conspiracy, in which the key figures were radical students and trade unionists both of whom were closely linked with the constituent parties of the United Front coalition.

The full array of the government's legislative powers was turned on the universities. On 8 May, 1971, " in terms of Regulations framed under the Public Security Ordinance the powers and functions of the National Council of Higher Education were vested in the Honourable Minister of Education who in turn delegated such powers and functions to the permanent secretary ".[20] Using the same powers as well as " emergency " clause of the *Higher Education Act*, the minister reconstituted the boards of regents of the Universities of Ceylon: Colombo, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara, from 20 June, 1971. The board of regents at Peradeniya had ceased to function from 3 February, 1971, with the resignation of the vice-chancellor, Professor E. O. E. Pereira. The man who replaced him, a professor of the medical faculty, took office as " competent authority " not vice-chancellor; he enjoyed emergency powers with the full backing of the government.[21] He was in charge of the University at the time of the outbreak of the insurgency.

Immediately after the outbreak of insurgency in April 1971, the government resolved on a policy of tighter control over the universities. It hit upon the idea of bringing this about through the device of a single university for the whole island with all the existing universities forming constituent units of such a structure, and with a central controlling

[20] National Council of Higher Education, *Report of the National Council of Higher Education for the Year, 1970–71* (Colombo: National Council of Higher Education, 1971), p. 89.

[21] *Ibid.*

authority situated in Colombo. A committee of academics favourable to this governmental policy was appointed in May 1971 to report on the re-organisation of higher education. They were asked to complete their work in seven weeks. This they did, and their report, more or less in keeping with the declared policy of the Minister of Education, recommended the creation of a single university consisting of several campuses, and the re-organisation and rationalisation of university courses. The report argued that this would result in administrative economies, the best utilisation of scarce financial resources and scarce academic staff and the prevention of unnecessary duplication of courses of study. This report was eagerly accepted by the government and most of its recommendations were incorporated in the *University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972* which became law on 15 February, 1972.

The new act reduced the universities of Sri Lanka to the status of administrative units—campuses as they were called—of a single university with its headquarters, called Senate House, in Colombo. It was envisaged that this re-organisation would take at least two years during which the Ministry of Education, acting through an appointed vice-chancellor, would have complete authority in the direction of university affairs. During the transitional period section 85 [22] of the Ordinance gave *carte blanche* to a group of officials who included a vice-chancellor, presidents of the various campuses, a registrar and a treasurer—all appointed by the minister—and the deans of faculties of each campus, all of whom were appointed by the vice-chancellor. The governing authority of the University—the board of governors—and the various academic bodies such as the senate, the campus boards, the faculty councils and the faculty academic committees, for which provision had been made, would function in purely advisory capacities to the vice-chancellor, the campus president or the dean of the faculty respectively. The storm of protest which erupted against the new act from all the prospective campuses of the new monolithic University of Ceylon could not extract a single concession of any significance from the government.

The opposition to the act was strongest and most consistent and lasted longest at Peradeniya where cooperation in the working of the new system was withheld in most of the faculties. At other campuses the the opposition was less prolonged and there was some measure of consent with regard to setting up the various academic bodies envisaged in the act.

The Minister was given the power to extend the period of transition at his own discretion and all that was required was a notification published in the *Government Gazette*. The period of transition was extended one year at a time from 15 February, 1974, when the first two-

[22] See Appendix B, p. 272.

year period expired, to October 1978, giving evidence thereby of the durability of ostensibly temporary devices.

Whether the extensions were the inevitable result of the reluctance of the Ministry of Education to relax its grip on the University, or whether Senate House had a vested interest in maintaining this centralised system of controls is at present uncertain. But there is surely one reason for these extensions: the act in the form in which it emerged could not possibly have worked with any reasonable degree of smoothness. The administrative machinery envisaged was inordinately complex and the potential for conflict in the spheres of authority of its multitude of academic bodies was enormous. The outcome was that the *University of Ceylon Act No. 1 1972* was never carried out in full, and from 15 February, 1972, its component campuses were governed under its transitional provisions.

The rationale behind the monolithic university structure has been that it would ensure administrative economies and also prevent needless duplication of courses of study being offered and the resulting wastage and dispersal of resources. In fact these objectives were never realised. On the contrary, the re-organisation and rationalisation begun in 1972–73 resulted in a chaotic distribution of facilities as each campus moved successfully to retain what it had. The one campus which failed in this enterprise was Peradeniya. In 1971 which was the last year of its existence, the National Council of Higher Education had a staff of 39 persons of all categories. The Senate House which replaced it had by 1975 a staff of 150 persons and this increased to 161 by 1977. Nor was this enormous increase in personnel at Senate House accompanied by a corresponding reduction in administrative positions in the campuses. These increased as well. The results were bureaucratic lethargy, administrative disorder, extreme centralisation of decision, and vastly increased expenditure on administration.

The academic community at Sri Lanka had long believed that the most useful instruments of centralised governmental control over universities had of necessity to be officials of the Ministry of Education or any other civil servants. The experience of the years from 1971 to 1977 showed that pliant academics appointed to positions of authority on the basis of political commitment rather than academic achievement were even more useful as instruments of governmental control over the universities.

In one area, real economy has been effected, namely in the tight control over admissions to the campuses. In this and in this alone has there been any continuity in policy between the National Council of Higher Education and Senate House. Both have been far more restrictive than the regimes before 1966, and more effective in increasing the number of students in the sciences courses and in holding in check the numbers of students in the courses of arts and social sciences (Table I).

TABLE I

University Admissions in Sri Lanka 1966–75

	Arts	*Science* (including medicine and engineering)	*Total*
1966–67	2,858	790	3,648
1967–68	2,888	872	3,760
1968–69	2,762	809	3,571
1969–70	2,285	792	3,077
1970–71	2,502	955	3,457
1971–72	2,239	1,099	3,338
1973	2,243	1,177	3,420
1974	2,236	1,296	3,532
1975	2,394	1,395	3,789

SOURCE: de Silva, C. R., " Weightage in University Admissions and District Quotas in Sri Lanka, 1970–77 ", *Modern Ceylon Studies* V, 2 (July 1974), pp. 168–171.

The one constructive achievement of the government in the field of university education, the opening of a campus in the northern part of the country, illustrates the constraints under which it has worked. The campus was established for political as much as for " academic " reasons. Perhaps the former—a desire to show a concern for the welfare for the Tamil minority—was the prime factor. The financial resources for the establishment of the new university were obtained by the simple device of using for this new venture funds allocated to the Colombo campus.

With the completion of the transitory provisions of the *University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972* governmental influence intruded into every aspect of university administration, with the possible exception of appointments to academic posts. With regard to the latter, the position varied from campus to campus. There was no systematic attempt to interfere in the content of courses or in teaching and research. Even so academic morale was so low and the atmosphere so menacing that academic freedom barely survived. University autonomy was dismissed as an abstract, alien and irrelevant principle.[23] The government's attitude to the question of autonomous academic bodies was expressed in the clearest terms in 1974 when the Law College—Sri Lanka's equivalent of one of the Inns of Court—was brought under the control of the Ministry of Justice. The autonomy of this institution, it was asserted, was incompatible with the sovereignty of parliament. There was not a whimper of protest from the

[23] See the speeches of F. R. Dias Bandaranaike, Minister of Justice, Public Administration and Local Government, and Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Minister of Plantation Industry and Constitutional Affairs, in the debate on *The Council of Legal Education* (*Amendment Law No. 6 of 1974*): *Hansard* (Sri Lanka), X, IV (5 March, 1974).

usually voluble academic community when the Law College lost its autonomy.

Towards the end of its administration the government made one additional effort to consolidate its hold further on the universities. On 30 September, 1975, amendments to the *University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972* were published in the *Government Gazette*. Ostensibly they were designed to bring the period of transition to an end but the price the campuses were being asked to pay for this privilege was enormously high. Through these amendments the Minister sought power to appoint the vice-chancellor of the University, the presidents of campuses, and the registrar and additional registrars at his sole discretion, and to appoint the deans of faculties on the recommendation of the vice-chancellor. More ominous were the provisions of Clauses 4 (5) (a) and (b) of the amending bill. These gave him the right to remove any or all of his appointees " when he considers it necessary to do so " and to prevent such removal from being " called in question in any court of law whether by way of writ or otherwise ".

It was in November 1976 that these amendments came up for debate in the National State Assembly. University teachers and students in all campuses went on strike to protest against the proposals. More effective was the strong opposition to the amending legislation in the National State Assembly. Confronted by overwhelming evidence of hostility to the policy of state control over universities embodied in these amendments, the government withdrew them with the promise to introduce a fresh set after consultation with university opinion. This was a face-saving tactical retreat by a regime which was losing its control of the National State Assembly and over the country.

The most significant feature of the debate was the speech of Mr. R. G. J. de Mel, M.P.,[24] the chief spokesman of the opposition United National Party on that occasion. After describing the amending bill as a " Draconian piece of legislation . . . hatched in secrecy and incubated in darkness without any reference to, or without consultation with the persons most concerned in university education ", he proceeded to explain that his party was committed to the abandonment of the one-university system and its replacement by a number of independent universities; and to the appointment of a university grants committee vested with the powers and functions traditionally associated with such a body.[25] For the party which 10 years earlier had introduced the *Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966* this was a remarkable change of policy. This was incorporated into the manifesto on which the United National Party fought the general elections of July 1977, and after its over-

[24] Mr. de Mel had been a member of the board of governors from its inception till his resignation from the government in September 1975.

[25] See *The Parliamentarian*, LVIII, 3 (July, 1977), pp. 206–207, for a summary of the debate.

whelming victory on that occasion, they were incorporated in the statement of government policy placed before the National State Assembly on 4 August, 1977. To demonstrate its commitment to these principles the government appointed a chairman-designate of the university grants committee in November 1977 and entrusted him with responsibility of drafting a new university law which would convert the campuses of the University of Sri Lanka into autonomous universities.

The Prospect

The prospect is more encouraging than it has been for over a decade for a positive and constructive relationship between the government and the universities based on a recognition of common interests and responsibilities. A chastened academic community grown increasingly more cynical of government pronouncements should take a dispassionate look at the autonomy it is being offered; it will suspect that the government will deliver much less than it promises. At the same time a realism born of the unpleasant experiences of the 1970s imposes restraints on their conception of what autonomy should mean. As for the government, there seems to be some realisation that the ill-defined subordination of the universities to the Ministry of Education since 1966 has had a deleterious effect on them. As a liberal regime with a pluralist outlook, the present government has no ideological antipathy to autonomous institutions. Nevertheless, because of all that has happened in the universities in recent years, there is a tendency to regard the restoration of autonomous status to universities as an act of faith at best and, at worst, as a leap in the dark.

APPENDIX A [1]

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Objects, Powers and Functions of the Council

3. The objects of the National Council as laid down in Section 8 of the Higher Education Act are—

(1) To advise the Minister on—

(a) The apportionment and control of expenditure on higher education.
(b) The maintenance of academic standards in higher education institutes.
(c) The administration of such Institutes.
(d) The co-ordination of higher education with the needs of the nation for social, cultural and economic development, and
(e) Any other such matters as the Minister may refer to that council for its advice.

(2) To perform such other functions and duties as are specified in this Act.

[1] The National Council of Higher Education, *Report of the National Council of Higher Education, 1966–67*, (Colombo: The Government Press, 1967), p. 51.

4. Among the more important powers and functions of the National Council are the following:

(1) To prepare, from time to time, in consultation with the Board of Regents of each university, quadrennial budgets for their maintenance and development.
(2) To make recommendations to the Minister as to the amount of grants which should be made to each university out of public funds.
(3) To determine, from time to time, the total number of students to be admitted to each higher educational institute and the apportionment of that number to the different courses of study in that institute.

5. The National Council is empowered to make regulations in respect of such matters as it may deem necessary to enable it effectively to exercise, discharge and perform its powers, functions and duties under the Higher Education Act. Among the more important matters specifically mentioned in the Act for which regulations may be framed are the terms and conditions of service of the staff of universities and their schemes of recruitment and the establishment and maintenance of minimum standards of instruction in universities.

APPENDIX B [2]

THE VICE-CHANCELLOR AND HIS POWERS

[Section] 85

(b) The first vice-chancellor may be appointed by the Minister at any time during that period, and if so appointed:
  (I) he may exercise, discharge and perform in respect of the university all such powers, functions and duties as are conferred or imposed on him under this Act or any appropriate Instrument;
  (II) he shall, unless he earlier vacates office, hold office until such time as arrangements for the transition to the new structure are completed as determined by the Minister; and
  (III) notwithstanding any other provisions of this Act, the first vice-chancellor shall have the power to reallocate the staff, students, equipment, land, buildings and other facilities of the university, inclusive of those of the old universities, among the several campuses of each campus including the faculties, the departments and sub-departments and the disciplines and subjects that are to be assigned to such faculties, departments and sub-departments and he shall during the transitional period have and exercise powers of the board of governors and any person or persons inclusive of officers named under this Act for the purpose of organising, carrying out and directing the functioning of the university during the transitional period.

(c) The first presidents of each of the campuses may be appointed by the Minister at any time during the period and if so appointed—
  (I) They may exercise in respect of the campuses such powers, functions and duties as are imposed on them under this Act or any appropriate Instrument;
  (II) the first president of each campus shall, unless he earlier vacates office, hold office until such time as arrangements for the transition to the new structure are completed.

[2] *University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972*, pp. 62–63.

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