

The National Education Policy Act. 1967

By M. L. GRANT

THIS ACT CONFERS WIDE POWERS on the Minister of Education, Arts and Science, to determine, with the assistance of an Advisory Council appointed by himself, a national education policy. Education, as defined in the Act, means instruction for white pupils up to Standard Ten in institutions, other than private schools, maintained by a government or provincial authority. Schools are to have a "Christian character" and the education provided is to have a broad "national character". The medium of instruction is to be the mother tongue. This is the policy laid down, to be rigidly and compulsorily applied.

Uniformity throughout the country is to be observed in respect of compulsory education, school age and conditions of service of teachers; there will be co-ordination of syllabuses, courses and examination standards.

With some of the measures of uniformity and co-ordination laid down there can be no quarrel. Teachers have long called for uniformity of salaries and conditions of service as between the Provinces. Nor should there be any objection to *an approximation of syllabuses, and standards of examination*, though it is to be hoped that the maintenance of "such diversity as the circumstances may require", mentioned in this connection, will be interpreted as allowing of that initiative and experimentation which have hitherto been preserved under provincial control. It is the diminution of the power and authority of the Provinces over vital educational policy, set in motion by the National Education Council Act of 1962, and now accelerated by this Act, which is causing so much misgiving.

Though the concept of the policy enunciated is vague, the composition of the Council to advise the Minister is clearly set out. The National Advisory Education Council, the body called into being by the Minister and appointed by him, will consist of an Executive Committee of not more than five, of whom there will be a chairman and vice-chairman. These five will receive salaries and will come under civil service conditions as laid down specifically in the Act. In addition to the Executive, who are part of the Council and whose chairman will be chairman of the Council, the Minister will appoint not more than two members from each of the four Provinces and one from South West Africa, not more than two from the Department of Education, Arts and Science, and three other members. As an amendment to the original Bill, the Minister has decreed that "members of the Council shall be persons who have distinguished themselves in the field of education or who, in the opinion of the Minister, are otherwise specially qualified in some aspect of the work of the Council", and also, "the appointment of every member of the Council and the capacity in which he is appointed shall be notified in the Gazette".

There is no representative element in the Council and no guarantee that the advice of any of its members, or of the Administrators who are to be consulted at various levels, will be taken. This is evident from the terms of appointment of members of the Council, the length of whose tenure of office is determined by the Minister.

Provision is made for a Committee of educational Heads, who are the Superintendent General of Education of the Cape Province and the Directors of Education of the other provinces with the Secretary for Education, Arts and Science as Chairman. It will submit recommendations to the Minister and the Administrators as to the "manner in which the national education policy can be carried out on a co-ordinated basis", and shall advise them on other matters referred to it or which it desires to bring to their notice. This committee, too, would appear to have only advisory powers in relations to the Act.

A clause in the Bill which roused considerable opposition empowers the Minister to cause an inspection to be made of a school or other educational institution or office to ascertain whether *the national education policy is being adequately carried out*. The Act as finally passed retains this measure with some modification as to the personnel of the inspectors who are appointed, who may or may not be regular permanent inspectors in the education department of the Province concerned.

The power to be exercised by the Minister will have few checks. It is true that consideration is to be given to suggestions and recommendations of the officially recognised teachers' associations, but this promise has not prevented one large and influential body of teachers in the Cape Province, the South African Teachers' Association, from expressing its fear that there will be inadequate, if any, representation of the teaching profession on the Advisory Council. Nor should parents be lulled into easy acceptance by the promise that they will be given a place in the education system through parent-teacher associations, school committees and boards, a place which they have held for many years.

Reference has been made above to the lack of definition of the terms Christian and National in the context of the Act. The fear is very real that these twin aims will be translated into the Christian National Education policy publicised some twenty years ago. That policy was wholly unacceptable to a large number of people because of its narrow exclusiveness and educational obscurantism. Moreover the exclusion of non-white pupils from the scope of the Act may be seen as a clear indication that non-whites are not to be regarded as a part of the South African nation. The critics fear that what is to be inculcated in the nation's scholars is the doctrine of apartheid, which is the ideology of a section and not the ideal of the whole of the South African people.