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Sir,

**A SEASON OF SWEETNESS; EDUCATION WITH TEARS**

The period between the 29 of May, 2015 and May 29, 2023 is regarded by many analysts in Cross River State as a nightmare. It was a period of very high expectation but no achievements. It was a period that witnessed the loudest noise but with very little in concrete terms.

Our annual budgets for instance were given fantabulous titles while their source of income and performance remained a mirage till date. It was largely described a period of much talking and less or no action.

Cross River State has been blessed with pragmatic leaders from 1999 to 2007 in the person of Governor of Donald Duke and from 2007 to 2015 by Senator Liyel Imoke.

The trio are trail blazers and much of the transformation witnessed in the socio-political landscape of the state during the period under review is the handwork of Donald and Liyel.

However, we were totally wrong when in 2015, we elected an even younger Cross Riverian, very highly educated, to the rank of a Professor.

It was a period no one wants to remember but sadly however, everyone wouldn't want to forget in a hurry. It was a period of "anything goes". Appointments were not given on merit, but on "man know man basis"

Even well established laws were circumvented with impunity to accommodate clannish and prebendal motive.

As a result of this and other vices, the public bureaucracy was not the only casualty, but even, the physical environment was badly affected, as the two Secretariat Complexes gradually became a jungle of sort, as they were all overtaken by weeds, due to reasons best known to Ayade.

Calabar, once seen as the cleanest city in Nigeria, gradually turned to a slum as mountains of refuse took over most parts of the ancient city oozing out, very pungent odour and even some major roads in the city were closed down as a result. The urban road were the worst of it. For once after public outcry, the Professor Governor, told a bewildered people of the state that he was not here to fill potholes.

Workers were promoted without implementation. The yearly increment of salary steps was also put on hold while gratuity payment was a no go area as no provision was ever made for it.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 2023, God of mercy had compassion on the people of the state through the election and subsequent swearing in of a benevolent and God fearing person, His Excellency, Distinguished Senator Prince Bassey Edet Otu, the Sweet Prince of our time.

The period between 29 May, 2023 and now did not only witness a change in administration but even the style is also totally different.

The first remarkable change was the immediate disappearance of refuse mountains in the metropolis. Even, the workers now have implicit confidence in their Governor, The Sweet Prince. This renewed confidence in the leadership is consequent upon his transparent and honest disposition.

So far the Governor has done well as he has remained a silent achiever, doing what will benefit a larger percentage of the masses without blowing his trumpet.

“Education” according to Ray Ekpu, in an essay titled “An excursion of the mind” which appeared on the newswatch edition of April 2, 1990; “is an excursion of the mind in which the teacher and the taught participate. The intellectual adventure is intended to burnish people and equip them for the service of society.

It is also intended to expose the beneficiaries to the humane values and make them better human beings but in the accomplishment of the twin goals, the search for truth is paramount”.

A state may rise to the apex of development or fall to its lowest ebb depending on the quality of the products of her educational institutions. If the right skills are given and the right values inculcated, then the state stands a good chance of being elevated by the collective good works of its educational institutions.

But if there is laxity in the skills taught and values inculcated, the state falls with its products and these products can't lift the state from the nadir of mediocrity. Education therefore loses its bearing alongside its products and state and its citizens are the worst for it.

From creation as South Eastern State in 1967 and later renamed Cross River State in 1976, education had been on the front burner of the state till 2015. During the period under review, the position of the Commissioner of Education has always been based on professional experience and intellectual competence. The position was never based on quota system or reward for political patronage but reserved for tested and trusted academic Dons with impeccable records in learning and character.

In recognition of its importance, the then Military Governor, Brig. Gen. Paul Ufouma Omu (Retired) had to send emissaries to young Dr. Peter Ogbang as a Senior Lecturer in the Premier University of Ibadan, to persuade him to come and take this appointment as the State Commissioner of Education.

This was in 1975, when the state was barely eight years old. Dr. Peter Ogbang did not disappoint, his achievement as a sound academic Don will remain indelible forever in our educational landscape.

From Dr. Peter Ogbang to Prof. J. E. Usua, Head of Department of Biological Science, Unical in 1980; Dr. Stella Atoe, Department of History, Dr. Mrs. Rose Oko, Department of English and Literary Studies, Prof. Zana Akpagu, Prof. C. O. Basse and Prof. Offiong O. Offiong, also from the University of Calabar. Due to their professional expertise both

national and international recognition was accorded to the state. Most of these Commissioners mentioned above were at various times elected as Chairmen of Education Commissioners in Nigeria.

The ministry of education is the gateway to our state. It was unfortunate His Excellency Prof. Ayade in 2015, appointed a Professional Nurse as the Commissioner of Education. As if that was not enough, in his second term, the Professor Governor appointed Amanke with a doubtful doctorate degree as a Commissioner of Education. Amanke was addressed as an academic doctor until he was recently derobed of the title by the University of Calabar.

The state heaved a sigh of relieve with the exit of Ayade, with the hope that the Governor His Excellency Senator Prince Otu, will reverse to the old order by appointing a Commissioner of Education from among our teeming professionals not minding the zone or tribe.

The present Commissioner of Education without being immodest but making a statement of fact is not ripe for this position. The present Commissioner of Education is not a product of academic excellence and can't be seen to promote any. He is more transactional in orientation than transformative. His eight years as the chairman of the State Universal Education Board (SUBEB) was a gargantuan failure, educationally. There was no renovation and intervention. There was no workshop for teachers retraining programme in his eight years.

During Mary Ntui and Ntufam Joe Eban tenures, new buildings were erected all over the 18 LGAs, teachers from primary to secondary were retrained for twenty four (24) different times. Such training workshops lasted for two weeks each term and on daily basis the trainees were served with breakfast and lunch. At the end of the week each participant was given Eight Thousand (8,000) Naira as allowance.

After pocketing Sixteen Thousand (16,000) Naira only in two weeks, before resumption of the term another sum of money is paid into your account plus the knowledge acquired. The present Commissioner of Education is not only unqualified to be there but largely a deliberate reminder of the days of impunity, lies and inaction. He is a clear example of new wine in an old wine skin "a man who lives by the same

vices he preaches against". If we are to be taken seriously in the pulling down of mundane monuments in Calabar and replacing them with the Holy Bible and Shepherd with his flock, then we need a cabinet reshufflement.

The state needs urgent attention in the educational sub sector now but this kind of transformation is beyond the comprehension and competence of the Commissioner. We need the service of a woman or man who understands the difference between human rationality and animalistic bestiality.

He is a twin Ph.D holder in both Education and Law respectively, no doubt Ph.D holders are viewed as being versatile and eclectic in their various fields of study, but can we equate the pedigree of this present commissioner with those of the previous. In fact, having not had the opportunity of lecturing undergraduates in any university settings, our present commissioner as a doctor of education is like a commander without troops, a green horn, kind of.

To be able to make an impact in education, the commissioner must have a firm grasp of the history of the problem, not treating the symptoms leaving the cause unattended. From all indications, the Hon. Commissioner is a proverbial "beautiful feathers" always playing to the gallery to attract public attention without necessarily doing the needful.

The major problem in the sector is the dearth of teachers in our public schools. In some schools, there is the problem of building infrastructure. All these are begging for attention from government but the commissioner focus has been the teachers and principals in particular.

From the tenure issue of principals which the Governor prevailed on him to suspend, to the punishment of principals who failed to submit names of candidates for free WAEC registration to the present kangaroo audit committee set by him, the principals now live in fear. Principals before the commissioner are the same like a cockroach before a fowl, no principal has ever gone free before the commissioner, in fact, they are always guilty as alleged. Their appearance before the commissioner is a kind of window dressing, a mere formality. Decisions are taken under this commissioner like a military tribunal; you come to hear the sentence

not to defend the allegations against you. It is a clear case of the saying that a bad workman always quarrels with his tools.

One of the beauties of democracy is the provision of the rule of law. Here boundaries are observed, recognized and respected. The secondary education board is a legal entity. It can sue and be sued. It is given the mandate to recruit, promote and discipline its staff.

All teachers and principals in the over three hundred (300) secondary schools in the state are direct employees of the Secondary Education Board, not the ministry of Education. There is no section of the edict that created the Secondary Education Board that gives the Hon. Commissioner of Education the power to do any of these three aforementioned functions on behalf of the Board. It has never happened even during the military era, but the Hon. Commissioner of Education, a Doctor of Law is authorizing the taking over of the Secondary Education Board legitimate function by the Ministry of Education. It is the irony of the situation and very sad accident of history.

Our teachers under the Commissioner of Education are treated like second class citizens, orphans sort of. The relationship between the commissioner of education and the principals is like watching the film "animal kingdom" where the strong (Hon. Commissioner) gets what it must, while the weak (principals) concede what it can't. Theirs is like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, which nobody gives attention to. Our schools are empty without teaching and non teaching staff. One Hundred and Eighty (180) teaching staff to be employed into Three Hundred (300) secondary schools, is a grossly skewed ratio.

Not even one to a school, I believe the Governor was not given a true picture of the practical reality in our school system. From Bakassi to Obanliku, the story is an appealing mess. For example in Yala LGA, Mathaias Offoboche Secondary School with a student population of approximately One Thousand (1,000) has only Eighteen (18) teaching staff including the Principal. Yache Community Secondary School, Alifokpa with Two Hundred (200) students has Five (5), Community Secondary School, Uchu, the home town of the Commissioner of Education has over Two Hundred (200) but only Five Teachers.

In Bekwarra, CSS, Afrike with over Five Hundred (500) has only Eleven (11) teachers. In Obubra, CSS Eja, Two Hundred (200) students with only Three (3) teachers, GSS Ohumuretet with Two Hundred and Fifty (250) has only Three (3) teachers.

In Boki GSS Olum has over Two Hundred (200) students but only Three (3) teachers. CSS Bokalum has over Two Hundred (200) but only Two (2) teachers (Principal and one teacher), GMSS, Bunyia – Irruam has over One Hundred and Fifty (150) students but only Three (3) teachers.

Biase has GSS, Ibini-Erei, with over One Hundred (100) students but only Three (3) teachers, CSS Etono Central has over Two Hundred (200) students but only Four (4) teachers, Odukpani LGA, the home of His Excellency the Governor is no better either, GSS Creek Town with over Two Hundred (200) has only Five (5) teachers while DAMSS, Usung Esuk with One Hundred (100) students has only Three (3) teachers in Obanliku, GMSS Blukonu with One Hundred (100) students has only Two (2) teachers. This picture is the same all over.

Under the "Sweet Prince" teachers have remained the weeping boys/girls. The fortune of the sector has remained unchanged since 2015.

Even in the recent elevation of Directors to Permanent Secretaries, not even one teacher was considered good enough. Unlike when His Excellency Donald Duke and Liyel Imoke in their different tenures extended the largesse to our colleagues in the persons of Late James Ene Boco (Eto) as the Principal of St. Patrick College, Ikot Ansa, with only few months to retire and even Lady Ann Eneobong, a Vice Principal to the rank of a Permanent Secretary. Even the level 17, promised us by Governor Ayade, 7 years after, no teacher has been so elevated. Our reward is in heaven, No Wahala.

In taking over some secondary schools from the founding communities in 2018, by the government, no indigenes of those communities was employed as the rule stipulates. We beg the Governor, The Sweet Prince to revisit this issue urgently. Also may we implore you also to ask all principals who pay Adhoc Staff through the PTA to submit names of

such staff to the Board for immediate regularization. Most of our secondary schools rely heavily on PTA staff for effective teaching.

Your Excellency, the Sweet Prince Sir, we appeal to you passionately to save us from a possible psychological trauma by giving us a Commissioner of Education who has a passion for the job, with a human face and heart.

Government should also stop the execution of the outcome of that audit committee by the commissioner that was set up to investigate and try selected principals, those perceived to be enemies of the commissioner. Not only were his perceived enemies singled out for investigation, they were also summoned to Calabar to appear before a select committee of staff of the Ministry of Education, even in these hard times coupled with the poor nature of the road. From Obanliku, Boki, Yala etc to Calabar is Fifteen Thousand Naira (N15,000) only. Thirty Thousand Naira (N30,000) only to and fro Calabar without feeding and accommodation. Some spent two or more days before they were attended to.

The action of the committee is clear violation of the rule of law, therefore a false assumption of office.

Principals fined were directed to pay various sums of money to a **Polaris Bank Account No: 4060010268, Cross River Ministry of Education and Imprest.**

All monies collected should be refunded to the principals concerned. If the government feels that the parents of these children are short-changed in anyway by the action of the principals, the Board has the statutory duty to act on behalf of government not the ministry. According the Public/Civil Service Rule, public/civil servants are not punished on first offence. They are warned severally before queries. These principals were not queried but invited to appear.

The University of Calabar for example is under the Federal Ministry of Education but the minister does not exercise the right of recruiting or disciplining erring staff of the university, it has never happened before.

Principals suffer daily distraction from, either; the Local Government Education Authority Staff, Ministry of Education Zonal Office Staff,



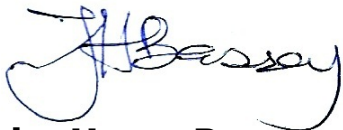
Ministry of Education Headquarters Staff, who troop in to the schools on daily basis in the name of monitoring. Each of these groups is always given something to fuel their bikes by the principals. If one may ask, from which source?

Many hands they say, spoils the broth.

Let Secondary Education Board alone administer our schools from time to time and make their observations and recommendations to the Ministry of Education whenever the need arises.

Let's not forget, when a medical doctor makes a mistake only one live is lost, however, if an administrator makes same mistake a whole generation of lives is lost.

A stitch in time saves nine.



**John Henry Bassey**