

2003 NATIONAL STUDENT MOCK PARLIAMENT

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Participants of the 2003 National Student Mock Parliament

Introduction

The 2003 Student Mock Parliament programme was designed to further the civic education of secondary school students in Lesotho, as a way of addressing the country's need for democratic transformation of society. One hundred and twenty (120) secondary school students from across the country were chosen to play the role of parliamentarians. They were first taught about structures and functions of government and trained in debating procedure through a series of workshops. Then, the students researched issues of national importance, prepared motions on these issues, and finally debated their motions in the 2003 National Student Mock Parliament.

Background

Lesotho is a country that struggles with the problems of a fledgling democracy. Chief among these problems is the difficulty of finding and securing good leaders. Many are prone to corruption or mismanagement of public affairs. The recruitment of talented and trustworthy people to government positions requires both the ready availability of such individuals and a healthy political process that ensures that the right individuals are placed in office. Unfortunately, this process is hampered by a lack of awareness and interest in the political process by the citizens at large. It is from the people that good leaders must be drawn, and it is the people who must ensure that these leaders are working for them. Thus, although democracy is here institutionally, the more effective functioning of democracy awaits a transformation within society itself toward a more

democratically-minded and democratically-shaped citizenry that will support and demand good governance.

Rationale

One way to address the need for such democratic transformation in society is through the civic education of secondary school students. Politically speaking, these young people have an important place within society. First, secondary school students are nearing the age when they will be eligible to vote. Second, students can be involved directly in politically focussed organisations or NGOs (Lesotho Young Christian Students is an example). Third, students will be a part of the general discussion of political matters in the lives of their communities. Finally, later in life these students may find themselves in positions of influence in political or bureaucratic offices. As we are often reminded, young people are the leaders of the future.

It was decided that a Mock Parliament would be an effective way to teach the students. This programme would contribute much toward making these students effective citizens. First, the students' skills of analysis will be developed. For the students to grapple with a complex issue, form a policy, and then defend that policy intelligently against criticism requires skills of analysis. These skills will help them to think clearly and intelligently about political issues. Second, the students will develop good skills of expression as they debate in a public setting. In the realm of politics, effectiveness is measured largely in the ability to mobilise the support of others, and for this skills of expression are essential. Third, the Mock Parliament will generate interest in the political process among the youth of Lesotho. By fostering such interest, we can hope that more young people will choose to take active roles in politics and governance, thus making available good political leaders in the future. Fourth, the Mock Parliament will make the students better-informed citizens. They will learn about the structure and function of government, and so be able to evaluate the actions of the government better. As well, the students will learn about important national issues as they examine and debate these issues in the Mock Parliament.

Additionally, the media coverage drawn by such a national-scale event will further generate political interest among the general population, including other students and young who could not participate in the event themselves.

Implementation

The Mock Parliament project was implemented in four stages.

Stage One: Recruitment of Secondary and High Schools

November 2002 to February 2003

Recruitment of secondary and high schools was essential to the programme. Teachers had the important roles of helping to organise the students, aiding them in their preparations for the Mock Parliament, and securing the support of parents. The support of schools was also needed to work with the students, and as well, many schools made their classrooms available to us for workshops.

The recruitment of schools was done by Lesotho Young Christian Students (LYCS), a partner of TRC in this project. We primarily chose to approach schools that were teaching Development Studies, as the Mock Parliament contributed to this curriculum. Between November 2002 and February 2003, 27 schools were approached, and 24 accepted the project.

Stage Two: Regional Training Workshops

May 2003

The country was divided into Northern, Central, and Southern Regions. In each region, a three-day training workshop was held in May 2003. These workshops had three goals. First, the students were taught about the Lesotho Constitution, the rule of law, and the structure and functions of state organs. Second, the students were given a detailed introduction to the process of parliamentary debate, after which they conducted a debate of their own. Third, the students were divided into districts, and each district chose a topic to prepare for the National Mock Parliament in December 2003 (Stage Four).

In these workshops, TRC and LYCS were aided by two parliamentary clerks, Mr. Motlalepula Mokhele and Mr. Khotso Manamolela. These guest speakers did an excellent job of teaching the students and leading them in the practice debates.

In total, 22 schools attended the Regional Training Workshops. The response to these workshops from both teachers and students was positive. In particular, teachers and students expressed appreciation for the care given by the facilitators and the material that was presented.

Stage Three: Follow-up Workshops

September to October 2003

The third stage of this project was to follow up on the students' research on their topics. A one-day Follow-up Workshop was held in each of the nine school districts participating in the project. (Unfortunately, schools from the tenth district, Qacha's Nek, were unable to attend.) We assessed the progress of the students' research and encouraged them to continue to prepare their topics in depth.

There was great variety in the amount of preparation done by the students. In some districts, the students were very motivated and had already prepared position papers by the time we came for follow-up workshops; however, in other districts, it was clear that the students had done little or no research. In each district, we examined the assigned topic in detail, asking critical questions, and helping the students to see any gaps in their research. Often, the teachers were helpful in this process. The students were encouraged to prepare strong arguments that would hold up during debate in the National Mock Parliament.

Stage Four: the National Student Mock Parliament

1 to 5 December, 2003

This project culminated in the National Mock Parliament where all the students from across the country gathered in Maseru. One hundred and nine (109) students attended, representing 22 schools.

This final event lasted five days. The first two days of the event were given to practice and preparation for the Mock Parliament. Mr. Mokhele returned to instruct the students again on the method of parliamentary debate. The students elected a Speaker, Deputy Speaker, Sergeant at Arms, Clerk, and Ushers to serve in their Parliament. A brief practice debate was held on the question of whether Lesotho should join the Republic of South Africa.



Students were given time to work within their districts on their assigned topics, refining their arguments, choosing who would present their motions, and finalising how their motions would appear on the Order Paper. Finally, the students were taken on a tour of the actual National Assembly chamber.

The Mock Parliament opened on 3 December, the third day of the event. The official opening was conducted by the Deputy Minister of Gender, Youth, Sports and Recreation, Mr. Hlonpho Ntšekhe, who made an encouraging speech to the students. The Mock Parliament sat for three days. A motion was presented by each of nine school districts present. After each motion was debated, a vote was taken, and the motion was approved or disapproved by the House. The official closing was done on 5 December by a board member of Transformation Resource Centre, Mr. Robert Likhang. Mr. Likhang addressed the students, emphasizing that the freedom of choice we are granted in democratic elections is meaningless without education and knowledge enabling



us to choose well. He expressed the hope that the Mock Parliament would play a part in enabling young people to one day become better statesmen.

Food and accommodations for the teachers and students were provided by Transformation Resource Centre at the Lesotho College of Education.

The event was well-covered by the local media: Radio Lesotho,

Catholic Radio, and TV Lesotho were all present.

Outcome and Evaluation

The Mock Parliament was successful in achieving its goal of furthering the civic education of the youth of Lesotho. The changes we had hoped to see in the students—development of skills of analysis and expression, greater knowledge of and interest in politics—were much in evidence throughout the project.

We saw the students exercising critical thinking skills in the Follow-up Workshops as we worked with them in researching their topics. They learned to ask why things are the way they are, to search for causes of social phenomenon, and then to evaluate whether proposed solutions will effectively address the problems at hand. The quality of the argumentation and debate we heard in the National Mock Parliament also testified to the students' skills of analysis. TRC team members and external observers alike were impressed with the quality of debate.

The students' ability to express themselves was developed. Over the course of the project, we could see how students gained confidence in public speaking and debate. In the National Mock Parliament, the students had to learn to speak convincingly and often spontaneously. They also had to speak in front of a large public gathering of their peers, teachers, organisers, and visiting dignitaries—a daunting task, but one that many students rose to with confidence.

In particular, the students' increased interest in the political process was in evidence in the way they connected their parliamentary debate to their home communities. In supporting their motions, they often drew on facts they observed themselves, for example, the number of police in their home district. This demonstrates an understanding that politics has to do with 'real life', as opposed to a common tendency to see politics as something far removed from the interests of the average citizen.

Perhaps the most noticeable effect on the students was an increase in their confidence as a group. First of all, the students came to feel a sense of ownership of the project; the Student Mock Parliament became *their* Parliament. The TRC staff and observers deliberately allowed the students to deal with the

difficulties of conducting a well-run debate on their own, and so the students came to take responsibility themselves for ensuring that the Parliament worked efficiently. Through ownership of their parliament, one could see that the students gained a sense of the power of solidarity and community action. This is an important thing for democratic citizenry. We must feel that we *can* be effective, particularly through co-operation, as against the tendency to be overwhelmed by the apparent immovability of the state.

The teachers and students involved were well pleased with the event. There were some unfortunate difficulties with the accommodations provided by LCE—rooms were not available immediately when our guests arrived, and many rooms were dirty and/or in disrepair—but the participants were patient and flexible. Students enjoyed the week and showed enthusiasm throughout. Numerous students and teachers told us that they hoped they could take part in the Student Mock Parliament again.

Constraints

Some schools were unreliable in attending workshops. A number of schools failed to attend the Regional Training Workshops despite agreements to do so. These included Eagles Peak High School, St. Patrick's High School, and Morapeli High School. Again, when we were conducting the Follow-up Workshops, a number of schools failed to attend. In this case, TRC relied upon the schools in each district which did attend workshops to share the information and training with the other schools in their districts. Finally, two schools, Johnson Baker High School and Auray High School, failed to attend the National Student Mock Parliament in December. This was very unfortunate, since these students missed out on the most important part of the program.

A second constraint was met in the accommodations provided by Lesotho College of Education. On 30 November, when the students and teachers arrived in Maseru for the National Student Parliament, LCE failed to provide us with the keys to the rooms we had rented. As a result, some students and teachers were forced to wait up to eight hours, until 11 p.m., until they were given rooms. In addition, many rooms were dirty and/or in disrepair, some to the point of being unfit for use. The grounds of the residence were also very dirty. If we choose to accept accommodations from LCE in the future, we will make certain that these problems do not happen again.

Directions for the Future

Transformation Resource Centre would like to see the Student Mock Parliament become an annual event. As was mentioned above, many students and teachers have already expressed their wish to take part in future Mock Parliaments. Indeed, most participants seemed to take it for granted that the 2003 Parliament was only the first of many. One student who was graduating this year, and thus would be unable to take part next year, even offered to volunteer with the programme next year to help younger students. Other community members and observers of the Mock Parliament have also encouraged us to continue the programme.

We believe that this programme is an effective tool to advance TRC's goals of civic education and good governance in Lesotho. The Student Mock Parliament is a sound investment in the future of this country. For this reason, we hope to be able to continue the project, and will seek the funding to do so.

