

Cultural preferment policy dangerous

CULTURAL safety seems destined to enter the lexicon of the race relations debate after the Christchurch Polytechnic affair.

The resurgence of racial and ethnic identity is a worldwide phenomenon. The assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, of Sri Lanka, was the latest act in the tragedy begun with the introduction of preferential policies for Sinhalese.

By institutionalising affirmative action in favour of the majority community, the government effectively discriminated against the Tamils, alienated them, fed their sense of grievance and contributed to their growing militancy and terrorism.

Other countries, too, have had unhappy experiences with preferential policies that have engendered reactions ranging from disquiet to hostility, opposition, divisive litigation, minor convulsions and outright civil war.

Preferential policies have four dimensions: protective, where the state strives to achieve equality of protection; ameliorative, with the goal of achieving equality of opportunity; compensatory, motivated by the desire to achieve equality of outcome; and participative, aimed at achieving equality of empowerment.

The belief underlying the policies is that some groups are so far behind in all measurable criteria that their survival and integration into the mainstream of society will not be possible without the government taking an ac-



Racial affirmative action rests on the assumption of superiority in the non-target group, and every action produces an equal and opposite racial reaction, writes Ramesh Thakur

tive role to bring them to the same economic, political and social level as the other groups.

Many of the issues which are now the subject of passionate debate in the west have been played out in India.

Policies of positive discrimination were mandated by the Indian constitution in 1950. After operating for more than 40 years, they have produced six harmful effects.

1. PERSISTENCE. Affirmative action programmes are always described as temporary expedients. In India, the rhetoric of transience is negated by the reality of persistence and proliferation. As group-based programmes permeate the public institutions of a country, they end up institutionalising the very divisions they are meant to eradicate.

2. TRIPLE EXPANSION. Positive discrimination policies in India have trebled in scope, embracing additional measures for the same target group, extending positive discrimination to newer sectors of society, and incorporating ad-

ditional target groups into the programmes. One commission identified 2399 backward castes, comprising 22.5 per cent of India's population, in the 1950s, another found 3743 by the 1970s, representing 75 per cent of the population. Last month, some MPs mooted the idea of forcing job quotas on the private sector. In the public sector, the quotas can cover up to 49 per cent of the available jobs. After decades of constitutionally sanctioned efforts to protect and promote sectarian preferences, India is caught in an escalating cycle of increasing numbers of groups putting forth claims.

3. FRAUDULENCE. If membership of a particular group confers unequal privileges, and if job markets and prospects for upward mobility are stagnant or shrinking, then fraudulent claims of membership in the target groups will multiply.

4. CAPTURE. Within groups receiving preferential treatment, benefits have been captured disproportionately by the better-

educated, more articulate and more politically skilled elite among the "disadvantaged". The real objects of affirmative action end up being trebly disadvantaged.

First, their problems continue. Second, the spotlight of public policy shifts away from their problems, for affirmative action, by expiating the guilt of the hereditary privileged, permits them to ignore the continuing problems with an easier conscience. Third, the conviction grows that the poor surely now deserve to be poor because of indolence or other self-inflicted faults.

5. DIVISIVENESS. Every affirmative action produces an equal and opposite racial reaction. There is a tension between ethnic diversity and social cohesiveness. If a government frames public policy in a racially conscious way, then it cannot expect groups suffering relative deprivation to act in a race-blind manner.

In 1990, as the Indian Government tried to broaden the definition of the underprivileged and to extend the range of reservations for them, society was convulsed. Students took to highly publicised suicides, streets were in flames. The instrument of sectarian harmony became the path to civil conflict.

6. POLITICISATION. Preferential policies are a specifically political response to symbols of sectarian identity. They create and nurture vested interests parasitically dependent upon the dispensing of state privileges. The pro-

grammes are meant to reduce and eliminate inter-group disparities. But group leaders are dependent for their leadership positions on the perpetuation of perceived disparities.

A solution of ethnic or cultural problems would deprive self-appointed leaders of a platform and a role; upping the ante by raising ever-expanding demands enlarges the role of group activists and gives them a bigger stage from which to manipulate more people. When demagogues take over, reason retreats. Bellicose intransigence and deliberate seeking of conflict with out-groups can be politically rewarding for regimes and leaderships.

In India, politicians try to calculate sectarian "vote banks". Even the rise of the militantly Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in December 1992 cannot be explained without reference to widespread anger at the Congress Party's attempts to capture the Muslim vote bank.

Considerable — indeed dangerous — cynicism toward the political process is now evident in India because individual and national interests are widely perceived to have been subordinated to the claims of numerous special-interest groups.

The most insidious consequence of affirmative action is its counter-productiveness. State dependency undermines the dignity of a collective entity and retards the realisation of human worth of its individual members.

Preferential policies foster the working-class values of solidarity instead of the middle-class values of thrift, hard work, self-improvement and property ownership; rest on the assumption of superiority in the non-target group; reinforce the sense of inferiority in target groups; perpetuate their sense of being victims, not masters, of their destiny; and keep them in ghettos.

Thomas Sowell, an eminent black American at Stanford University, has argued that the above effects are found in almost all countries with such policies.

Perhaps New Zealand is uniquely smiled on by the gods, and will escape the damaging developments. Or, more likely, New Zealand should have the right to make the mistakes of everyone else.

In my view, state intervention can be as market-distorting in the cultural marketplace as in the economic. Because it promotes an artificial market, it could be as futile an effort as state economic planning.

In both cases, the proper role of the state is to provide the political, legal and administrative contexts whereby non-governmental actors can compete freely on a level playing-field. That is, laws and policies should be neutral between the competitors.

Distinctions based on accents of birth should not be acceptable criteria for discrimination between individuals. Instead, facilities available to one group should be equally available to any other group.