

# PUBLIC POLICY MASTER CLASS

WITH



## The Conundrum of Federal Character

A friend of mine once asked a question that put federalism in perspective and I pose the same to you today: Which will be of more concern to you when in a storm on a long haul flight, the ethnicity of the pilot or his competence and experience flying planes? As surreal as the question is, everyday we make choices for ethnicity and religion over competence and then claim that we do so in line with federal character.

The results of our choices have far reaching consequences to the development and stability of our nation. There may have been compelling reasons why Federal Character was birthed during our second republic (1979 – 1983) and some arguable reasons why it still exists today; however, after over thirty years of characteristically pursuing Federal Character, it may be time for us to appraise it in our pursuit of True Federalism.

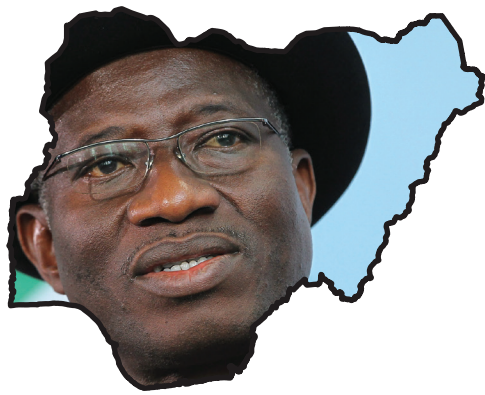
Proponents of Federal Character assert that the continued existence of Nigeria as a nation is dependent on equal opportunities, fairness and equal representation. To this end, The Federal Character Commission was established by Act No. 34 of 1996 with a mandate to implement and enforce equity and fairness in distribution of public post and socio-economic amenities.

Federal Character makes it mandatory to select people into public offices and committees based on their states of origin and/or religion. Given our diversity in culture, heritage and resources, one can argue that such a system is in place to ensure that no region oppresses the other. However, this raises three pertinent concerns that I will attempt to illustrate.

According to the Federal Ministry of Education, in 2013 the cut-off marks for children seeking to attend unity schools in Nigeria were determined on the basis of states of origin with a score of 139 applicable to any child from Anambra while a score of 2 was applicable to a boy from Yobe and a girl from Zamfara. What is curious to me is how the system can be so bad that students will score 2 and below and we think this is a federal character issue.

Given the success of individuals across Nigeria in various fields, it is clear that ethnicity alone does not determine competence. These terrible scores and the appalling cut-off marks are a reflection of poor quality of teachers and a failure of the supervising education authorities evidenced by a child not being able to write her name or answer basic questions after six years of schooling.

Permitting someone who scores 2 into the same school and at the same time as one who scores 180 in the name of Federal Character is a great disservice as the underlying problems remain unresolved and the child with the poor score is unlikely to compete favorably with



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those with higher scores. In fact the student with a score of 2 could affect the quality of education available to the other students in the class assuming the teacher is committed to carrying every student along. The first concern is therefore that Federal Character masks problems and prevents them from being addressed objectively.

When one arrives at the immigration point of most countries, an immigration form is provided for completion. It typically has fields for nationality and place of birth and scarcely do we find a field for state of origin. This could be because the interpretation of a state of origin differs from place to place. Whilst in the United States, your state of origin is the place of your birth, in Nigeria your state of origin is the geographical area where your ancestors migrated and settled before

boundaries were drawn. Barack Obama, who was born to a Kenyan father in the United States, is today President of the United States of America because federalism in the United States promotes equal rights for all American citizens irrespective of ethnicity. A child born to Chukwuemeka in Potiskum, grows up there and only visits Anambra at Christmas, speaks better Kanuri than Igbo yet cannot claim to be from Yobe or aim to contest for elective position there. Chukwuemeka Jr. attends school in Potiskum and takes the same tests as his class mate yet Federal Character suggests that Chukwuemeka Jr. must score 139 while his best friend Musa can choose not to study, score 2 and proceed to the same secondary school as Chukwuemeka Jr. Where is Chukwuemeka's home and why have we made him a victim of antiquity? This brings up a second concern which is that Federal Character defines our identity based on boundaries drawn in 1939 or thereabout rather than the realities of today.

Each month Commissioners of Finance gather in Abuja to collect a revenue allocation to their respective states from the federation account (FAAC). This is standard practice to distribute the yields from the federal purse which today mainly constitutes oil rents. States rely heavily on the federal allocation to execute capital project and some even use the funds to meet recurrent expenditure implying that some states do not even generate enough revenue outside FAAC to cover their operations. Singapore, a one-city land-locked nation with its five million plus inhabitants had no natural resources and a preponderance of poverty yet developed itself by investing in the education of its people and providing a conducive environment for companies to establish operations. Today, it is ranked amongst the most developed nations in the world with the fourth biggest financial centre and boasts the third highest per capita income globally. This example suggests that states in Nigeria have more than is required (before FAAC is shared) to be self-sufficient and develop into destinations of choice for business and tourism. This surmises the third concern with Federal Character which is the rent seeking behavior that it promotes and its discouragement of meritocracy, hard-work and innovation.

One of our most pertinent objectives as a federation ought to be people-focus inclusive development and the three aforementioned concerns depict how Federal Character detracts from this. Since both the 1979 and 1999 constitutions were drafted during military administrations and handed to civilians to execute, one wonders whether the constitutional conference will address the issues of Federal Character and perhaps recommend True Federalism.

Let us:

**1. Fix what is broken with our systems and not hide under an unequal and biased**

**system of Federal Character.** In education we need to review the curriculum, incentivize and deploy good teachers to public schools, create vocational training schools and prioritize children attending primary and junior secondary school. Various sectors need to be evaluated and transformed

**2. Redefine the state of origin of a person to mean the place of his birth and nurturing and not necessarily the roots of his forefathers or recognize the state of residency which is the place where a person lives, work and pays his taxes.** In reality, we should expunge state of origin and religion from all official forms to help all of us build our true identity as Nigerians.

**3. Promote meritocracy over mediocrity in all spheres so that each person can operate at the highest level of his ability and together we can fast-track the development of our nation.** There is no need for people to get undue advantage for a job placement at which they will not perform well. Better to create a plethora of opportunities beyond government work such that each one can focus on what he knows and thereby deliver his very best. Agriculture, vocation, trading, acting, singing are examples of areas that we should be promoting. We must, through a merit-driven mindset harness the collective potential of all Nigerians. This way, our development will be faster, easier, more inclusive and less turbulent. As the Super Eagles squad is being selected to the World Cup, we do not use state of origin to select players and goalkeepers before the match. When they play a match and a goal is scored, we do not ask for the religion of the goal-scorer before we cheer. We see the goal as a collective victory for Nigeria and that is exactly what it is. Since Federal Character does not feature at football games, which unites us so strongly, why do we pretend that it can work in governance or public service delivery? It simply limits our collective delivery as a nation and divides us into little groups of inefficiency. What must remain important to us is our quest towards unity and inclusive development.

Our pilot during this storm must be competent, experienced and willing to disengage autopilot and stop his crew from tampering with the fuel tank to steady the plane. It should not matter where anyone is from, within Nigeria. Rather, we should be concerned with the value each can add and our willingness to add this value. We should see the achievements of government as our collective achievement and stand united to create an environment where various opportunities emerge and each person can find his niche and operate at his best.

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