

Exercise in Political Accommodation

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Yet another first among the many achievements of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao is his heading of the largest Union Council of Ministers in independent India's history. The recent reshuffle of the Union Council of Ministers has resulted in its strength rising to an all-time high of 70. The largest Council of Ministers had earlier been the Ministry headed by Indira Gandhi in 1974 when there were 65 Ministers.

An analysis of the strength of the Council of Ministers during the stewardship of the earlier Prime Ministers shows that in 1952, in the Ministry headed by Pandit Nehru, there were 35 Ministers. The strength of the Ministry gradually increased over the years, and in 1964 at the time of Nehru's death there were 51 Ministers. During Lal Bahadur Shastri's Prime Ministership the number of Ministers increased to 53 and during the initial days of the Prime Ministership of Mrs Indira Gandhi the strength of the Council of Ministers was 55 rising later to 65 in 1974. Rajiv Gandhi's Ministry, in January 1985, had 41 Ministers and when P.V. Narasimha Rao became the Prime Minister in 1991, the Council of Ministers had 56 Ministers. The non-Congress governments formed at the Centre had relatively smaller Ministries, the largest being when Morarji Desai headed a 44-member Council of Ministers and the smallest being the Council of Ministers headed by Chandra Shekhar consisting of 34 Ministers.

The question over the optimum size of a Ministry has been debated whenever there has been a major expansion of the Ministry. Even in the Constituent Assembly, at the time of the drafting of the Indian Constitution, a suggestion was made by one of the members that the strength of the Council of Ministers should be fixed at 15. (*Constituent Assembly Debates*, 7:1141) However, such a proposal was thought to be impractical and Dr Ambedkar asserted that it "is not possible at the very outset to set out a fixed number" for the Ministry (*Constituent Assembly Debates*, 7:1157) and felt it should be left to the discretion of the Prime Minister. Later the Administrative Reforms Commission, in its recommendations on the size of the Council of Ministers, had opined that in view of the emergence of new functions an increase in the

number of Ministers was inevitable. While providing for a large enough Council of Ministers—40 to 45 members—the Commission felt that 'suitable limits' should be set for the size of the Cabinet and recommended that this body should consist of 16 Ministers. Yet another suggestion with regard to the size of the Council of Ministers has been that 10 per cent of the strength of the Lok Sabha—55—would be the ideal strength for the Council of Ministers. It is interesting to note that one of the newly inducted Ministers, in an interview on Doordarshan, mentioned that a 70-member Council of Ministers was justified as it was 10 per cent of the strength of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha put together. Such an argument would justify the addition of ten more Ministers! It was also suggested, when Chandra Shekhar became the Prime Minister (his party had just a little over 50 MPs in the Lok Sabha), that the strength of the Council of Ministers should not be more than 10 per cent of the strength of the ruling party in the Lok Sabha!

However, none of these yardsticks provide a realistic method to determine the 'optimum' size of a Ministry. It is beyond a shadow of doubt that the size of the Ministry is dictated by the compulsions of the political situation and the present Council of Ministers bears testimony to this fact. The fact that Narasimha Rao had to ensure 'political accommodation' to a large number of Congress MPs is more than obvious.

While it is an accepted norm in a parliamentary system that it is the prerogative of the Prime Minister to determine the strength of the Council of Ministers, the recent expansion of the Ministry raises a few vital questions. In the first place, does the strength of the Congress party in the Lok Sabha warrant the induction of so many Ministers? Even when Rajiv Gandhi had a three-fourths majority in the Lok Sabha, he did not think it necessary to have such a large Ministry. One out of every five Congress MPs has been made a Minister. Secondly, with less than a year left for the next Lok Sabha elections, the political calculations that have triggered off the expansion are self-evident. While most of the new entrants asserted after the swearing-in ceremony that their job was to bring about vigorous implementation of the policies and

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programmes of the government and to take to the people the message of the achievements of the government, what appears to be more relevant is the fact that a significant number of those included are known to have been Congress dissidents or close to the leaders of the breakaway Congress group. Ministership appears to have been the carrot dangled before the dissatisfied leaders to keep them within the flock. Further, some of those included seem to have been rewarded for demonstrating their unflinching loyalty to the party 'High Command'. Thus, to solve the Congress party's internal problems the taxpayer has had to bear the brunt of extra expenditure on an expanded Ministry.



WHAT is of deeper significance is the fact that, soon after assuming office as the Prime Minister and initiating the policy of economic reforms, Narasimha Rao had promised to streamline the structure and functioning of the government with a view to ensuring its efficiency and accountability. One laudable measure mooted by him then was a 10 per cent cut in the size of the government bureaucracy. As the political leadership is required to lead by example, a 10 per cent cut in the size of the Council of Ministers would not have been out of place and would have demonstrated the sincerity of the government in reducing non-development expenditure.

It is also interesting to note that in the present 70-member Council of Ministers, only 20 enjoy Cabinet rank and 12 others are Ministers of State with independent charge. As many as 38 Ministers (54 per cent) are Ministers of State working under the direction and supervision of Cabinet Ministers. The category of Deputy Ministers has, as a result of the last reshuffle, been dispensed with. Earlier, between 1952 and 1977, there had been a steady increase in the number of Deputy Ministers and they invariably accounted for more than one-third of the Council of Ministers. On the other hand, the number of Ministers of State has seen a sharp increase since 1977. The Cabinet has, in most cases, been a compact body of 15-20 Ministers. More than half of those in the present Council of Ministers happen to be Ministers of State without independent charge and would, therefore, be working under the guidance of the Cabinet Ministers. It thus becomes clear, as mentioned earlier, that the Ministry expansion has

permitted the 'accommodation' of several ministerial aspirants (leaving many disgruntled in the wake of the expansion) without giving them direct responsibility. It must also be pointed out that nearly half of those in the Cabinet are members of the Rajya Sabha.

Attention must likewise be drawn to the fact that in all the Congress Ministries formed at the Centre since 1964 there has been at least one woman Cabinet Minister (during Nehru's Prime Ministership there was no woman Cabinet Minister between 1957 and 1964). In the present Ministry none of the women Ministers has been given Cabinet rank.

In view of the burgeoning size of the Ministries there is the urgent need to restructure Ministries and departments on more scientific lines. In the present Ministry, Ministers of State have been given independent charge of important portfolios like Commerce, Urban Development, Shipping and Transport, and Petroleum. On the other hand, there are Cabinet Ministers who have been given exclusive charge of portfolios like Food, Civil Supplies, Chemicals and Fertilisers. In the past too Ministers of State have been given independent charge of major Ministries like Railways and Information and Broadcasting and Cabinet Ministers have been in charge of Ministries like Tourism, Textiles and Programme Implementation. The Administrative Reforms Commission had, as part of its recommendations of the machinery of the Government of India, suggested that various departments under the Union Government should be classified under 16 Ministries and each should be headed by a Cabinet Minister. The junior Ministers could be given charge of "overseeing the implementation of some specific policies and programmes" within a Ministry or given charge of a wing or a department within a Ministry "with powers to take minor policy decisions". While it may be politically convenient and useful to retain the practice of giving independent charge of Ministries to Ministers of State, a more rational system of Ministry classification with each Ministry under a Cabinet Minister needs to be devised.

A final point needs to be made on the Prime Minister retaining under his direct charge important Ministries like Defence and Law. This practice continues in spite of the expansion of the Council of Ministers. From the perspective of ensuring more effective overall coordination and supervision, a convention needs to be developed that in ordinary circumstances the Prime Minister will not be directly in charge of any Ministry. ■