



Power & Politics

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SOMEONE once said that Ministers of State were “nobodies” because their only job was to reply to questions in Parliament that did not call for a verbal answer: the “unstarred” questions which are on paper and whose answers also come written and are merely placed on the table of the house. In the good old days of single party governance and rule by a supreme leader, junior ministers, as they are called, were handed these jobs with a that’s-all-you-deserve attitude.

Most of them took the jobs and spent the next five years doing nothing. There were exceptions of course: as minister of state for Internal Security in the Narasimha Rao government, Rajesh Pilot was the *de facto* Home Minister and an effective one at that. Madhavrao Scindia did such an excellent job as junior minister in Railways that his elevation to cabinet status was just a matter of time and he later went on to do commendable work in the Civil Aviation and Communication portfolios. The same alas cannot be said of the sons of these two Congress stars who sadly are no more with us. Sachin Pilot is MoS in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology and Jyotidaritya Scindia is the MoS for Commerce and Industry. Both are incredibly gifted young men but unfortunately they are not being used to their full potential.



Sachin Pilot

Sachin and Scindia are just two of the 38 ministers of state, almost all of whom feel they are being shortchanged or not used properly by the prime minister. The Manmohan Singh council of ministers is 78 strong, the largest in the country’s history. There are 33 cabinet ministers including the prime minister; seven MoS hold independent charge who pretty much function as full fledged cabinet ministers and are more or less free to dictate policy in the manner they deem fit. But for the 38 ministers of state, work mostly revolves around inaugurating a youth festival that the senior minister doesn’t have time for, or to be the minister in waiting when the president of Burkina Faso or some such place is on a state visit. This can be frustrating and the juniors have for long jostled for more but forever have been denied.

The problem is confounded in a multi party alliance like the UPA where ministers belong to different parties and the senior has such a vice like grip on the entire ministry that his junior may as well stay back at his palatial bungalow (yes, they have that at least) in Lutyens Delhi and assist the wife in tending to the kitchen garden. That is why a lot of juniors are pinning much hope on the meeting that Manmohan Singh has convened on January 19 where all 38 junior ministers and seven ministers with independent charge have been invited. This is the first such meet-

ing during UPA II and I have no doubt that some of the more ebullient juniors will have a lot to tell Manmohan Singh. Don’t be surprised if some of the seniors have already asked their secretaries to invent perfect alibis to deflect all charges and accusations.

But what happens between the two sides is less important than the collapse of some fundamentals that have brought things to such a pass. There is the collapse of collective responsibility and the blame belongs to both. At one end, a Shashi Tharoor comes along and tweets his way

through office, making statements that go against established policies. On the other hand, there are ministers with nothing to say. There are ministries in which virtually no work gets done because the senior ministers are mostly absent, politicking in their home states, yet do not hand over even the smallest of responsibilities to their juniors. In this, the DMK and the Trinamool ministers are the worst offenders. Ministerial truancy has attained such heights that only 13 of the 33 senior ministers attended the last Cabinet

meeting convened by the prime minister. And if ministers are truant, can MPs be expected to be any different?

That explains why during the last session of Parliament, the Lok Sabha had to be adjourned twice for lack of quorum. There is a lesson in this. Give the committed and efficient junior ministers their due. Make the likes of Sachin and Scindia cabinet ministers. Give them complete charge of their departments. They will deliver. And inspire their seniors and fellow MPs to work harder and similarly deliver.

Give the young their due



Gadkari's wings could be clipped next month

NITIN Gadkari's stint as the BJP president is less than a month old, but there are already indications that things are not going exactly to the plan. The new chief had promised that his priority was to bring the BJP to a stage where it would once again be seen as a threat to the ruling Congress, but from what's going on within the party, it appears that Gadkari will, like his predecessor Rajnath Singh, be busy fobbing off enemies within leaving him little time to take on the Congress. Though settled in office, Gadkari still has not been able to name his team of office bearers.

And if amendments to the party constitution, recommended by the Bal Apte committee appointed by the outgoing chief Rajnath Singh are an indication, the prerogative to choose his team will no longer be his. If adopted, the amendments will drastically prune the president's powers and ensure that Gadkari does not enjoy the undiluted powers that giants like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani did. The proposed amendments include handing over powers to the party's central parliamentary board to overrule decisions made by the president and curb his powers to select his own team of office bearers and national executive.

And for the first time in its 28 year old history, the party has also proposed that procedures be put in place to remove the party chief midway through his term. The BJP national council meeting scheduled in Indore in February will discuss these and other amendments and if passed, Gadkari will come out of the council meeting a much sadder man than when he went in.

Needless to say, the cabal that has run the party for the last few years and dragged it down from its preeminent position will be very very relieved that their powers remain intact.

□ WE have seen politicians turned ministers pampering their constituencies. Long before Mamata Banerjee became Railway Minister and showered every possible gift on West Bengal, her many predecessors in Rail Bhavan located coach factories, sanctioned new lines and started new trains in their states and proved the adage that the heart is where the home is. But SM Krishna and Prermeet Kaur, who also holds charge of passports, are taking pampering to new heights. Come February 1, those seeking passports from the regional offices in Bangalore and Chandigarh will no longer have to endure long waits to lay their hands on the document. They will get their passports within three days, thanks to the extra care that the minister for External Affairs and his deputy have for their own states. It's a kind of super Tatkal scheme, except that you don't have to pay the extra fee of Rs 1500 in addi-



SM Krishna

tion to the passport charges of Rs 1000.

Which makes me wonder why Shashi Tharoor hasn't joined the bandwagon. Despite having four offices, the queues outside passport centres in tiny Kerala are the longest. The minister should give it a thought. He is known to have his way and if he can assure Mallus who are forever queuing to go to Dubai—damn the recession—in 2014 he can ensure victory not only from cosmopolitan Trivandrum but even backward Malappuram.

M K Narayanan is the fall guy

AS National Security Advisor, MK Narayanan has been one of the most powerful persons in the UPA. So what is one to make of the sudden decision of the government to move him out to the Kolkata Raj Bhavan where Gopal Gandhi has put in his papers? The governor mansions across the country, as we well know, are exclusive retiring homes for the faithful and Narayanan, dependable and devoted as he was, had a lot left in him to serve the government in the demanding job as NSA.

Obviously, there are powerful lobbies who don't share the prime minister's views about Narayanan's priorities as an officer. His drives for transparency in defence deals, seeking the sources of

foreign investment have earned him the wrath of the powerful defence, corporate and foreign lobbies. Diplomats have never tried to hide their animosity towards him. And that's what leads me to believe that his transfer is only the first in a series of shakeups that will take place in the next few months. Someone—and it's not the prime minister—is chanting the mantra 'perform or perish'.

South Block is crammed with too many post-retirement appointees and a few who have been given service extensions. After more than seven months of UPA II, many of them are yet to justify their continued stay in office. Food prices are zooming upwards and we have one of

the prime minister's closest economic advisors comforting us every fortnight that everything will be fine within the next. The reality is different because by the next fortnight, prices have gone through the roof, yet with barefaced cheek, they assure us yet again that one more fortnight is all it will take for normalcy.

It's the same set of people who wax eloquent from high tables in foreign capitals about 8 percent growth when the Right to Food Act and the Right to Education Act cannot be implemented because there is no money in the treasury. Yet, they are on the lookout for fall guys. They found one in Narayanan. I see a purge happening in the near future.