

Let Us Return to Old Fashioned Government

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Government is a continuing process and unless there is a revolution of the Soviet or Chinese model, structures of government continue to remain as originally set up, with contextual changes from time to time. For example, the system of land records and survey and settlement has come to us right from the times of Akbar and his Revenue Minister, Todar Mal. Even this system finds its origin in the Mauryan set up. When the British took over they continued the old systems of Tehsil, Thana and Patwari Circle, though they superimposed the administrative unit of a district which contained within it various new departments of government which did not exist in the Mughal days. The British officer incharge of the district not only coordinated the entire administrative machinery, including the police, but also ensured that the interests of Empire were looked after at the district level because he represented the Crown. We have carried over this system and though the changes necessary to attune it to democracy have been made, a post 1857 British District Officer could walk into a 2014 district and recognise it as something familiar. The strength of India is that on the framework of administration which holds the country together we have built new structures of development administration, economic administration and the other paraphernalia required to manage a modern State. In this we must bear in mind the provisions of our Constitution which on the one hand through the Preamble and through the Directive Principles of State Policy mandates a welfare State and on the other it provides the separation of powers between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Between the Legislature and the Executive there is a lateral link through the Council of Ministers, which is collectively responsible to Parliament, but within the framework of the Executive the permanent civil servants, as per Article 53 which vests executive government in the President and Article 77, which provides for the Business Rules, are responsible for implementation of policy and for providing politically neutral non-partisan, efficient and honest administration.

If the Constitution is so clear both in its objectives and the machinery which will achieve them, why is there so much disillusionment with government, the politicians and the bureaucracy? Does it mean that we should scrap the system and create a new one? This later question has been examined by more than one Administrative Reforms Commission, the last being the one headed by Veerappa Moily. Such Commissions take a broad view, but do not go into details, they deliberate over years, pontificate, give their report, only to have the report consigned to some forgotten bin. The system, however, continues to go down-hill. Implementation of schemes and projects is inordinately delayed, law and order is breaking down, employment is not growing and everywhere there are complaints of corruption even at petty levels and in matters which really require no particular decision making. One or two British officers per district managed this country, not at the point of a bayonet but through the confidence of the people that government will be functional. Today a whole army of bureaucrats is unable to recreate that confidence. Why is that so?

In a democracy the final decision making has to rest with the representatives of the people, that is, the elected officials at the political level. Politicians, in turn, are required to formulate policy and take necessary decisions which will enable that policy to be converted into

implementable programmes. Implementation is the job of the bureaucracy. If, however, politicians begin to eye their office not as a means of promoting welfare but as an instrument for personal gain, then they cannot frame policies of welfare. This confuses the civil servants, who also comes under pressure to use the authority of government to enrich both the politicians and themselves. It is not the system which is wrong but rather the politicians and officials who promoted greed but overlooked duty. In the process good government is lost. What happens if one loses one's way when travelling? One retraces one's foot steps to the point of last recognition and from there one charts a new course which is correct. Instead of abusing the system and advocating that it be scrapped let us go back to the last point which we could identify and then systematically remove all those factors which are causing the administration to go wrong. Let us go back to old fashioned government.

When I was a young officer, starting my service 56 years ago, we had already entered the era of planning. We were aware of the fact that development administration calls for skills other than the merely regulatory and we were required to acquire them. However, it was drilled into us that the mantra of government lay in (1) Accessibility of the officers to the people (2) Professional competence in knowing rules, regulations and working methods of every department in which one served. (3) Clear directions to one's subordinates about what was expected of them (4) Establishment of a chain of command in which from the lowest to the highest the work assignment was clear-cut, every immediate supervisory level supervised and inspected the subordinates, the Head of Department at the district level ensured that the department functioned efficiently and accountability was specific and was enforced. Disciplinary control over the subordinates vested fully in the supervisor, who did not hesitate to act when this became necessary.

The system gradually eroded, not because it was intrinsically bad but because we ourselves allowed it to decay. Political interference led to subordinates developing lateral loyalties to politicians and others and as disciplinary control weakened officials became more irresponsible and more corrupt. What we need, therefore, is a restoration of good old fashioned government in which the chain of command is defined, specific duties are assigned at every level and the officials' work is consistently supervised and inspected. If during inspection it is found that there are lapses then they must be corrected and if a lapse is deliberate the official must be punished. Merit must be recognised and rewarded. We have also to restore confidence amongst the officers that for every bona fide action they will be protected and that it is better to take a decision and make a mistake which can be corrected, rather than take no decision so that whilst the official may be safe the work of government comes to a halt. Today officers are afraid to take decisions, which is causing a great deal of damage to the system, to the people and to the country.

Let the new government take monumental decisions but let it remember that it is officials who implement them. Let us, therefore, go back to a system in which everyone knows what is expected of him and what is his duty and then is encouraged to do his duty so that good government is restored.
