

Which Are The Most Important Departments Of Government?

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There was a time when ambitious IAS officers would give their eye-teeth for a posting in one of the economic ministries, which included Finance, Industry, Commerce and, to a lesser degree, heavy industry, steel and petroleum. These ministries gave them a high international exposure, entailed a great deal of foreign travel, brought them close to the corporate world, opened the door to perquisites and privileges and also ensured comfortable post retirement jobs in the corporate world or in international organisations. However, with the advent of information technology and interaction through telecommunications and the internet, much of the glamour went out of these ministries. Amongst the rulers themselves suddenly Home and Defence became the prime ministries of the Government of India, partly because of the power that a coercive force gave to our politicians and partly because of the very rich pickings in defence contracts. Dr. Manmohan Singh's government further reinforced this by handpicking persons for the posts of the Home Secretary and Defence Secretary, as also the heads of IB, R&AW and CBI for a two-year fixed tenure which would carry them beyond the retirement age of sixty. The excuse offered was that these posts required continuity and, therefore, the officers serving in them must have at least a two years tenure. Of course it never occurred to government that officers appointed to these posts should have been selected at an age of fifty-eight years or slightly younger so that by serving up to sixty years they would still have at least two years in the post. This would give continuity without disturbing the inter se cadre age structure. Now even within the IAS and IPS a caste system was introduced in which the Heads of Home and Defence Ministries and the three Police/Intelligence organisations were the Brahmins and all other officers were the Shudras. There could be no more retrograde step than this.

There are certain questions which arise out of a mindset which considers certain ministries more important than others. The Home, Defence and Finance Ministries are required to create an environment of internal security and complete protection against external aggression, coupled with financial security so that the nation's resources are carefully husbanded and applied where needed, without there ever being a fear of paucity of funds. These ministries are important because if there is no environment of public safety and financial security the nation can never move forward. Therefore, these ministries and the organisations under them are very important for the safety and security of the country. But the objective of government is not merely to prepare a cocoon within which the country lies safe and protected. The objective of government is also to create an environment in which a butterfly emerges from the cocoon to lend beauty, strength and a flight along the path of development so that the country moves forward. A cocoon is purely defensive but it is only when the butterfly begins to fly that the world becomes beautiful. In the context of government the driving force of development can never be the regulatory or defensive departments. Obviously a nation progresses according to the skill of its human resources, the undertaking of ventures which bring forward economic movement and the development of a just and equitable environment in which there is social justice. If we view government from this point of view then it is no longer Home or Defence which are the most important departments of government. The single most important department of government has to be the Ministry of Human Resource Development, encompassing education as a whole. It is education which

develops human resources, makes them literate, imparts them skills, launches cutting edge research which leads to innovation and invention and replaces a population of low skills by a population with the ability to achieve anything through its education, research and training. HRD then becomes the most important ministry of government because it is the one which shapes the future of the country through the children that it educates.

A sick nation can never progress because its people would be so sapped by diseases that they would never have the energy to move forward. It is only a healthy nation which has the energy not only to work and deliver, but think, innovate, invent, write, develop a scientific temper and provide the manpower which will carry the country forward. A healthy nation will always be progressive and, therefore, the Health Ministry would be on par with HRD in the hierarchy of government.

A nation needs infrastructure, the physical, social and professional. For the social infrastructure to develop the country needs social justice, empowerment of those who have been deprived so far, protection and development of woman and child, upliftment of tribals and the scheduled castes and the creation of an environment in which the State fulfils its duty under Article 38 of the Constitution “ to secure a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people”, The Departments of Social Justice, Tribal Welfare, Woman and Child Development have to be amongst the ministries which are deemed to be essential if India is to progress.

Infrastructure, in this case meaning all forms of transport and the roads, railways and water ways along which such transport moves, power, its generation and distribution, irrigation which frees India from over dependence on the monsoon and telecommunications are all areas of infrastructure development which call for high priority. The ministries dealing with these issues, therefore, should be deemed to be of the highest value to government and must enjoy a status accordingly.

There are three sectors which generate employment and the consequential wealth. Agriculture, Industry and Commerce are all areas which can create gainful employment, help in increasing the GDP and generally help to push India along an arc of acceleration of growth. The above broad classification of departments is indicative rather than omnibus. There are so many other departments like Tourism, Culture, Sports, Urban Development, Rural Development, Environment which have their own place of importance within government and in no way is one ministry less important or less desirable than another. The mental perception about the comparative importance of ministries is totally artificial, illogical and perhaps based on the fact that departments which have uniformed personnel are always seen to be more glamorous than those departments where people wearing long coats and gowns practice alchemy in their laboratories and offices. This is reflected in the jockeying for ministries amongst the politicians and the assignment of portfolios to ministries. Home, Defence and Finance are the favourite ministries of both politicians and civil servants. This has to change. The ministries dealing with HRD, Health, Agriculture, Employment Generation, Infrastructure Development should get senior ministers with a track record for good work and who are capable of energizing the department concerned. Let us take the example of education, that is, HRD. Kapil Sibal and Arjun Singh were undoubtedly highly educated, vocal and more than capable of understanding the demands of the job. Both made a perfect dog's breakfast of their ministry because both were self-opinionated, had a personal agenda and were not prepared to listen to reason or argument. Murli Manohar Joshi, despite allegations that he tried to suffronise education, was perhaps the best Education Minister

we have had because he himself is an academician of note, understands the nuts and bolts of the education system and, because of his own teaching background, was able to handle the politics which plague academia. The way he added to the autonomy of IITs, gave them generous funding and forced them to keep fees at a reasonable level so that the overall Indian could send his child to an Indian Institute of Technology without breaking his own back through the financial burden that this might involve, is most commendable. He tried to persuade the Indian Institutes of Management to follow suit and it is unfortunate that they did not heed his advice. The net result is that the IITs have a prohibitively high fees structure, to afford which students have to take huge loans. This immediately changes the objective of the students. Being educated is no longer his priority. On the other hand, by enhancing his own employability the student tries to land a really lucrative job in order to pay off the costs of education and the liability he has incurred for the pleasure of studying in an IIT. This has made the IIT system almost entirely corporate oriented in which placement and package have replaced academic achievement as a benchmark. No meaningful research ever comes out of an IIT, with the system having degenerated into a training ground and employment exchange for the corporate world. Had Murli Manohar Joshi been listened to things would have been very different and the Indian Institutes of Management would have been exciting venues of imparting education and knowledge and by using the very talented students, been able to launch innovative research in the field of management in the Indian context.

In government formulation the Prime Minister had tried to take a balanced view. On the whole it is a good cabinet, but in assignment of portfolios the Prime Minister is stuck in a groove in which Defence, Home and Finance still play a pivotal role. That is where his best and most senior ministers have gone. HRD, on the other hand, has a person who is a first time minister and whose age is only thirty-eight years. She has no administrative experience and her political exposure has also been somewhat limited. The world of education is in some ways very peculiar because there is perhaps more politics in academia today than there is in politics itself. The players in this field are the academicians, students, present and future and the bureaucracy. The job of the ministry is, or rather, should be, to prepare a grand strategy for education in which right from kindergarten school right up to the highest university a synergy is developed in which the schools form a base of excellence and the pyramid is built on it so that it climbs to the apex through a series of institutions of educational excellence. Will the new minister have the sagacity to be able to frame the broad policy outlines which help in achieving the real objective of education?

HRD Ministry should be the one which consistently thinks ahead to try and determine the disciplines of the future and the size of the student body which has to be catered for. Constant interaction with the user ministries is necessary so that a policy may be framed in which there are equitable but need driven plans for meeting our future human resource requirements. Coupled with this is the fact that there is a constant struggle between the bureaucracy which wants centralised control and academia which wants complete autonomy. Because micro management of institutions is not possible either at the level of the Centre or the States one has to move towards a system of genuine decentralisation of academic functions so that there is the highest degree of autonomy available to educational institutions. In this the bureaucracy must realise that its role is on the one hand to create a policy framework within which the system will operate and on the other simultaneously build up a mechanism which, without appearing to be invasive, yet calls academicians to account. The structure of such a mechanism can be debated, but the need for it appears to be irrefutable. Will the new minister be able to ensure the kind of autonomy which is

needed at institutional level, while having a system of accountability which keeps the institutions on their own toes?

What has been said about education will apply across the board to the key ministries, especially those which deal with the social sector. That is why one needs ministers of the calibre of Murli Manohar Joshi to head these ministries. The present structure of the Council of Ministers does not indicate that the Prime Minister has not broken away from a syndrome in which Home, Defence and Finance form the reigning trinity to which all other persons pay obeisance. If the ministries which will create a new India are denied the priority they need in the government structure, then one is afraid that the development goals of the new government will not be realised. This is a point on which the Prime Minister must ponder.
