

THE PLANNING COMMISSION & PARKINSON'S LAW

"Touchstone"

IT is probably true that the retirement of Mr V. T. Krishnamachari from the vice-chairmanship of the Planning Commission—a post which he had held from the inception of that body—and the consequent necessity of having to find a permanent successor to him are not going to induce the Prime Minister to think in terms of any basic re-organization of the constitution or functioning of that institution.

A very sound case exists, nevertheless, for reform and recasting. For instance, there is surely scope for the import of more expertise into the membership of the Commission. While it may be idle to hope that the predominantly political character of that body will change, it is legitimate to demand that the business of planning at its highest level must engage the knowledge and experience of people who have a practical grasp of the economics of development. In particular, there is at present not even one member, who can boast of a background of personal acquaintance or association with the trade, commerce and industry of the nation—a deficiency which cannot be indefinitely overlooked.

Secondly, the anomalous position of the Minister for Planning cries out to be corrected. What precisely are his functions and responsibilities with regard to the work of the Planning Commission is a matter of mystery; that he is not the most influential member of that body is, however, an open secret. For all that one is able to see, Mr Nanda seems to do no more than make those dull and long-winded speeches in Parliament at the beginning and the end of the

periodical debates on the five-year Plans. If all that the Minister for Planning has to do for the Planning Commission is to be its mouthpiece in Parliament at irregular intervals, it will make no great difference were the post to be abolished and the Prime Minister, or the Finance Minister required to perform as spokesman.

An even more serious—because positively mischievous—anomaly is the role of the Hony. Statistical Adviser to the Planning Commission. Who or what exactly Prof. Mahalanobis is—or thinks that he is? It has been suggested often enough that the term "hony." in his designation is more a comfort to him and a convenience to the Government than a concession to the public exchequer. Be that as it may, whereas statistics is a relatively humble though useful science, the part which the Statistical Adviser essays to play in the work of the Planning Commission is reported to be neither humble nor very useful. Those who claim to know something of the power-struggles that are said to go on ceaselessly among the backroom boys of the Planning Commission darkly allege that the good professor has his own secretariat secretly functioning in jealous independence of the regular secretariat of the Commission and that he often has a way of producing parallel plans which unsettle the minds and upset the digestion of the more legitimate plan-makers. Since the Statistical Adviser's judgment on issues of economic development is not always sound—one recalls with a shudder his proposals in his "plan-frame" for the second plan to freeze the production of organized consumer goods industries—the liberty or licence which Prof. Mahalanobis seems to enjoy to

butt at will into the work of the Planning Commission must cause that alarm which any exercise of power without responsibility arouses in the public mind.

The banishment of expertise from the membership of the Commission has resulted in an exaggerated importance being attached to the authority of so-called experts functioning at the Secretariat level. That the Planning Commission has some well-qualified and competent men on its vast staff is not denied, but it does seem to be the case that there are far too many officials of no particular talent doing work of no particular value. And here we come to the main organizational weakness of the secretariat of the Planning Commission, which is its bigness. Of Parkinson's law there can be no more cynical fulfilment than is displayed in the expansion of the Planning Commission's secretariat over the years. In the name of collecting data and analysing it, in the name of whetting or screening the proposals and schemes prepared by Ministries at the Centre or Governments in the States, and in the name of evaluating programmes and their achievements, the Planning Commission has succeeded in setting up a numerous assembly of officials who are engaged, to a considerable extent, in either making work for others or are duplicating the work that is being done elsewhere. The rationalization of staff and work in the Planning Commission and the weed-

ing out of superfluous men and jobs is a task which the next permanent Vice-Chairman of the Planning Commission would owe to himself to tackle with firmness and strength. By having more recourse to the utilization of technical manpower available in the Central Ministries and State Governments and the commissioning of *ad hoc* bodies for specific jobs of planning or evaluation, the Planning Commission should find it possible to avoid much of its current unproductive expenditure on its regular secretariat.

Finally the role of the secretariat of the Planning Commission in the business of planning may usefully be defined and interpreted in more clear and careful terms than is the case at present. Normally it should be the limits of the functions of the secretariat to provide the material for the making of policy. Actually, there were occasions in the past when assertive enthusiasm on the part of some senior official or other had, in the absence of vigilance on the part of the members of the Commission, succeeded in extending the authority of the secretariat into the making of policy itself. There is reason to suspect that the Planning Commission's judgment, particularly in such matters as agrarian reforms, co-operative farming and State trading in food grains, have not infrequently been influenced by such intrusion. This, again, is an aberration against which Planning Commission should learn to be on guard.

The views expressed in this leaflet do not necessarily represent the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

With best compliments of:

Forum of Free Enterprise

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