

THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

As the Constitution of India provides for a Parliamentary System of Government modeled on the British Pattern, the Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister is the real executive authority in our politico-administrative system.

Composition

The Council of Ministers consists of three categories of Ministers, namely, Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, and Deputy Ministers. The difference between them lies in their respective rank, emoluments, and political importance. At the top of all these ministers stands the Prime Minister-supreme governing authority in our country.

The Cabinet Ministers heads the important Ministers of the Central Government like Home, Defence, Finance, External Affairs and so forth. They are members of Cabinet, attend its meetings and play an important role in deciding policies. Thus, their responsibilities extend over the entire gamut of Central Government.

The Ministers of State can either be given independent charge of ministers/departments or can be attached to Cabinet Ministers. In case of attachment, they may either be given the charge of departments of the Ministers headed by the Cabinet Ministers or allotted specific items of work related to the Ministers headed by Cabinet Ministers. In both the cases, they work under the supervision and guidance as well as under the overall charge and responsibilities of the Cabinet Ministers. In case of independent charge, they perform the same functions and exercise the same powers in relation to their Ministers/departments as Cabinet Ministers do. However, they are not members of the Cabinet

and do not attend the Cabinet meetings unless specially invited when something related to their ministers/departments are considered by the Cabinet.

In 1952, the Ministers of State was given the new designation of 'Minister of Cabinet Rank'. But in 1957, the earlier designation was restored.

Next in rank are the Deputy Ministers. They are not given independent charge of ministers/departments. They are attached to the Cabinet Ministers or Ministers of state and assist them in their administrative, political, and parliamentary duties. They are not members of the Cabinet and do not attend Cabinet Meetings.

It must also be mentioned here that there is one more category of Ministers, called parliamentary secretaries. They are the members of the last category of the Council of Ministers (which is also known as the 'Ministry'). They have no departments under their control. They are attached to the Senior Ministers and assist them in the discharge of their parliamentary duties. However, since 1967, no parliamentary secretaries have been appointed except during the first phase of Rajiv Gandhi era.

At times, the Council of Ministers may also include a Deputy Prime Minister. Thus Sardar Patel in the Nehru's Ministry, Morarji Desai in the Indira Gandhi's Ministry, Charan Singh in the Morarji Desai's Ministry, Jagjivan Ram in the Charan Singh's Ministry, Devi Lal in the V.P. Singh's and I.K Advani in the A.B. Vajpaae's Ministry served as Deputy Ministers. The Deputy Prime Ministers are appointed mostly for political reasons.

Council of Ministers vs Cabinet

The words 'Council of Ministers' and 'Cabinet' are often used interchangeably though, there is a definite distinction between them. They differ from each other in respects of composition, functions, and role. These difference are mentioned below in table:

Role of Cabinet

1. It is the highest decision-making authority in our politico-administrative system.
2. It is the chief Policy formulating body of the central government.
4. It is the chief coordinator of central administration.
5. It is an advisory body to the President and its advice is binding on him.
6. It is the Chief crisis manager and thus deals with all emergency situations.
7. It deals with all major legislative and financial matters.
8. It exercise control over higher appointments like constitutional authorities and senior Secretariat administrators.
9. It deals with all foreign policies and foreign affairs.

Kitchen Cabinet

The Cabinet, a small body consisting of the Prime Minister as its head and some 15 to 20 most important Ministers, is the highest decision-making body in the formal sense. However, in practice, still smaller body called the 'inner cabinet' or 'kitchen cabinet' has become the real centre of power. This informal body consists of

Prime Minister and two to four influential colleagues in whom he has faith and with whom he can discuss every problem. It advises the Prime Minister on important political and administrative issues and assist him in making crucial decisions. It is composed of not only Cabinet Ministers but also outsiders like friend and family members of the Prime Minister.

Every Prime Minister in India has had his 'inner cabinet'-a circle. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Inner Cabinet' consisted of Patel, Azad, Ayyangar, and Kidwai. Lal Bahadur Shastri relied upon Y.B. Chavan, Sawan Singh, and G.L. Nanda. During the era of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the 'inner cabinet' (which come to be called the 'kitchen cabinet') was particularly powerful and consisted of persons like Y.B. Chavan, Uma Shankar Dixit, Farukhddin Ali Ahmed, Dr. Karam Singh and others. A.B Vajpayee's 'inner cabinet' consisted of L.K. Advani, George Fernandes, M. Joshi, Parmod Mahajan, and so forth.

The prime Minister have resorted to the device of 'inner cabinet' (extra-constitutional body) due to its merits, viz.,

- (i) It, being a small unit, is much more efficient decision-making body than a large cabinet.
- (ii) It could meet more often and deal with business much more expeditiously than the large cabinet.
- (iii) It helps the Prime Minister in maintaining secrecy in making decisions on important political issues.

However, it has many demerits also. As rightly observed by Avasthi and Avasthi,

- (i) It reduce the authority and status of the cabinet as the highest decision-making body.

(ii) It circumvents the legal process by allowing outside persons to play an influential role in the government functioning.

The phenomena of Kitchen Cabinet (where decision are cooked and placed before the cabinet for formal approval) is not unique to India. It also exists in US and Britain and is quite powerful in influencing governmental decisions there.

5. They not only include the Minister in charge of subjects covered by them but also include other Senior Ministers.

Cabinet Committees

The Cabinet works through various Committees. The following points can be noted with regard to Cabinet Committees in India.

1. They are extra-constitutional in emergence. In other words, they are not mentioned in the Constitution. However, the Rules of Business provide for their establishment.

2. They are of two types-standing and ad hoc. The former are of a permanent nature while the later are of a temporary nature. The ad hoc committees are constituted from time to time to deal with special problems. They are disbanded after their task is completed. For example, the Emergency Committee was set up in 1962 after the Chinese invasion.

3. They are set up by the Prime Minister according to the exigencies of the time and requirements of the situation. Hence. Their number, nomenclature, and composition varies from time to time.

4. Their membership varies from three to eight. They usually include only Cabinet Ministers. However, the non-cabinet Ministers are not debarred from their membership.

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