

# Fresh faces in government

It is time to review the notion that public policy roles must be a monopoly of career bureaucrats

By MANISH SABHARWAL

**T**he most interesting comment about Nandan Nilekani's appointment last month as chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India was posted by an anonymous but self-declared civil servant on the Web, who said: "It's amazing that (the) government could not find a single competent IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer to head this authority. Mr Nilekani will soon discover that government is different from business."

This antibiotic reaction against lateral entrants is not new; it echoes the recoil by teachers against education entrepreneurs, pharmaceutical company lifers against non-scientist CEOs, tech-lifers against non-engineer leaders, and NGO types against private sector migrants. But the arguments for lateral entry into public policy—contrary to public perception—are not about injecting competence or rooting out corruption; they involve diversity and performance management.

The competence argument is shallow because many career bureaucrats have strong IQs and sharply developed emotional intelligence—it would be ludicrous to suggest they don't, while their private sector counterparts do. And the corruption argument falls flat because many private sector Indian fortunes have been made by regulatory capture; it's even arguable whether India's poverty would be substantially lower without corruption.

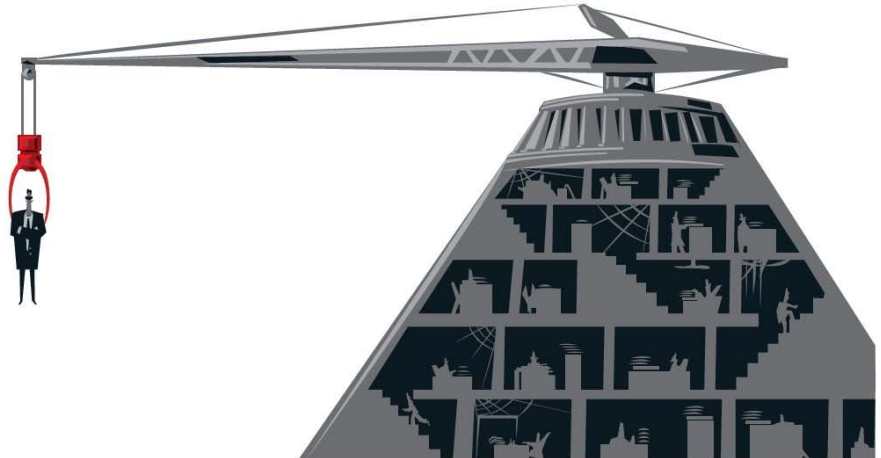
First, let's consider diversity.

Just as French leader Georges Clemenceau said that war is too important to be left to generals—and Kapil Sibal is proving that education is too important to

be left to teachers—public policy is too complex to be restricted to people with no other experience. The upsides of diversity are well documented: The book *Organizing Genius* by Warren Bennis finds that "great groups" have lots of diversity. Indian policy debates polarize between two extremes: totalizing a problem (give me a policy that works for 500 million people because individual small projects don't move the needle), or micro-fragmenting it (give me a project or centre of excellence for 30 people because policies are hard to implement in a democracy).

But India's solutions lie at the intersection between strategy and execution; creation and preservation; and people and processes. While no individual can possibly have all those abilities, organizational capabilities are unlike height or shoe size (something that can't be changed), but are more like muscles (that can be built up), and acquired by putting together teams. Public policy diversity leading to effectiveness has strong historical precedent in India; Akbar (who had Tansen, Man Singh, Todar Mal, Birbal and so on) and Ranjitt Singh (who had Zorawar Singh, Hari Singh Nalwa,

Lateral entry means diversity and performance management: the right person in the right job at the right time



Fakeer Azizuddin and Dina Nath) were two great leaders who accomplished the rare combination of big dreams and flawless execution because of deep and diverse meritocracies hired from outside.

Second, there's performance management. Promotions in Indian bureaucracy are based on objective but ineffective criteria such as a civil servant's year of joining. I argued with my "1964" civil servant father for years about the insanity of such a "line", but gave up when he explained that, all other things being equal, the promotion within a batch went to whosoever had a higher rank in the qualifying exam taken more than three decades ago!

We need to instill a "fear of falling" or "hope of rising" within the bureaucracy: This will happen not just with tweaking the seniority criterion, but could also arise from outside competition for top policy slots. Obviously, we need to find a balance between the US system (where about 4,000 people are ap-

pointed by every new president) and where India is today (where outside appointments to influential and non-ceremonial roles are probably fewer than 20). Public policy education has not taken off in India because of the lack of an entry ramp into real policy action; even the small window that got us Planning Commission deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia and finance commission chairman Vijay Kelkar is now closed.

This is not a rant against career service bureaucrats: To be sure, they provide the continuity and memory needed to balance change. They service difficult bosses who have temporary jobs. And any thinking about fixing public policy human capital has to include politicians, because there is some truth in the cynical comment that the only highways to get ahead in Indian politics are either genetic or geriatric. The problem is complex but, as Lant Pritchett at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government says, the

Indian state's inability to deliver outcomes ranks as one of the world's top 10 biggest problems—right up there with AIDS and climate change.

Getting the right person in the right job at the right time is half the battle. Even cynics agree that Nilekani's appointment is joint testimony to his capabilities and this government's courage.

Now that Nilekani has actually begun his job, many people are curious about his long-term plans. But does it matter if lateral entrants into public policy are like the Roman general Cincinnatus—who was summoned from his farm to deal with an enemy attack, but returned to the plough once his duty was done—or, like Manmohan Singh, who stayed the course and rose to bigger things? No, because both outcomes leave India less poor and more just.

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