

# High cost of a large

*Atkins*

*Rob & G. J.*

## cabinet

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By Sultan Ahmed

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THE administrative disadvantage of having an unduly large federal cabinet and an unwieldy council of ministers and advisers have been agitating the concerned citizens.

The issue is not only the salaries of ministers and ministers of state and also the much larger perquisites which were recently doubled, but the fact that the limits set on the perquisites could be easily breached with impunity, as it often happens. And yet there is more wasteful and needless other expenditure on them, the total of which can be staggering. A part of the burden falls on the provincial governments when the numerous federal ministers go on a visit to the provinces. The centre should be paying the cost of such visits, but in actual practice it does not and delays it as much as it can.

The number of ministers and advisers now totals 66. To these are to be added two more advisers and several ministers of state soon to meet the demands of political exigencies in a multi-party ruling system. Add to them the 34 parliamentary secretaries on a monthly stipend plus a performance allowances and 34 more chairmen of the standing committees of the National Assembly for various ministries. That makes a total of 134, plus the speaker and deputy speaker.

That reminds one of the tradition of small Balochistan Assembly in which the majority of members were office holders — ministers and in many other capacities. So they could not be voted out from outside but could only implode from within as the small parties withhold support to the government.

Now following the sudden expansion of the cabinet the ministers have to be provided chambers. The ministers need personal staff who are usually four in number beginning with the private secretary and personal assistant. The ministers can, in addition, get additional staff from their many attached offices. When the number of personal staff swells they too need additional office space. All that ultimately leads to the demand for erection of additional office blocks which can meet future need of cars, officially one actually two or more. But they manage to get far more from their attached offices whose bosses are ready to oblige the minister.

A minister visiting Karachi often needs four cars — one for himself, another for his family for shopping, one for his staff and the fourth one for his friends to come and go. A minister

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But the visiting minister should have enough number of police mobile vans in his escort wherever he stays or goes. But there are not enough mobiles and not enough cops. Too many cops in Karachi are on VIP duties of assorted kinds to provide enough security to the visiting ministers. So the ministers wanted bullet-proof Mercedes for themselves as well, but there are not such cars although the Ruler of the UAE gave six of them to Pakistan as a gift.

For all the clamour for privileges and perquisites for the ministers there is a constant complaint from the members of parliament that the ministers are not in the House to listen to them or redress complaints of the people of their constituency. Such protests come from the members of the ruling coalition as well. And the members on

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their part absent themselves so frequently or do not turn up in the house, and the House has to adjourn without a quorum too often or a session going smoothly breaks for that reasons.

For all that the house has to meet for a minimum of only 130 days in a year, almost for just one third of the year, unlike the civil servants who have to attend their offices regularly. That shows the lack of sense of responsibility on the part of the MNAs in a country in which we have an assembly only at times.

The sessions start very late for want of quorum and are adjourned abruptly and it is the same situation the next day. The attendance used to be much better and the sessions more orderly when they used to begin in the morning. The ministers then said they had office work to do and official meetings to attend in the morning, and so the sessions were shifted to the afternoon.

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to retain their party offices, or get hold of new party offices if they have none. That will reduce the time available to the ministers to do office work.

In fact, the ministers will be spending government funds and using official facilities like cars and telephones and office staff to do party-work which is not proper. But propriety is not the prime concern under the system.

Top officials can perform Umra at the expense of state. In the past some performed Umra at their own expense but that can't be done now for security reasons. And the security has to be elaborate and tight and that is very expensive.

Former President Ziaul Haq used to say that in the plane he was using there was plenty of surplus space. So he filled it up with a large entourage. Then there are marriages to attend in various parts of the country and the journey must be marked for its tight security. All that costs a great deal of money to the state.

The rule is if there are heightened security hazards the top persons make the minimum of trips and expose themselves to the minimum of the people in this age of TV and IT. In fact when most important persons move around under a stiff security cordon the people are greatly inconvenienced and eventually become resentful as the traffic jam worsens. Such situations should be avoided to the maximum possible extent particularly when they are on TV for long most of the nights.

The final item of expenditure is the legislator's development programme. For that the parliamentarians including the Senators are given Rs. ten million a

year and provincial assembly members a half of that amount. And now the members of the District Council, too, are calling for development allowance for themselves and the government is inclined to agree to that.

Supporters of the government may get larger than this specified amount depending on their political pull and how close they are to the party chiefs. And the opposition members may find it difficult to get the money sanctioned and get the money late.

However ineffective, the standing committees of parliament for various ministries may be, their chairmen are well looked after by the government. They have got separate offices with the requisite staff and a brand new Toyota cars of 1300 CC for themselves. And yet it was reported before the end of last year that the parliament passed only two laws in a year.

All that makes the parliament a poor model for young politicians to follow. A National Assembly which is too often

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Then, a new minister needs a house and finding a suitable house which meets the taste of the minister, his wife and the family is no easy task. Tastes differ and preferences vary. It appears several ministers approached the prime minister to get a house. But he said the days the prime minister allotted houses to ministers were over. Now it is the job of the minister for housing. Once the minister is provided with a house he heeds domestic staff, including a cook, a gardener etc., at public expense.

And when the minister is on a tour to the provinces, other problems arise. The relevant provincial minister should be available to him. That is no problem in Punjab and Sindh which have an over-supply of ministers wanting to be in the

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The problem with the afternoon sessions is that the members wake up late after taking a nap and come to the house late. Hence the sessions start late. Then comes the call for Maghrab prayers and some of the members disappear. Then comes the call for Isha prayers and more members leave. Somebody then points out that there is no quorum. The lobby bells are rung and for long and yet no member who had left the Parliament House returns. He is done for the day. The sessions is adjourned.

In the western countries where the session of parliament begins in the afternoon, prayers do not intervene in the evening or at night. Party discipline is much stronger and the members of parliament have a high sense of duty and voters keep a sharp eye on the more active members of the assemblies. The record of voting by the members is also very well tabulated by the voters. Newspaper coverage of the parliamentary proceedings is far better and more comprehensive.

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All that makes the parliament a poor model for young politicians to follow. A National Assembly which is too often adjourned for want of quorum or want of interest of the members in the legislative affairs of the country is a dispiriting institution for its young members.

President Musharraf is all praise for the young members of the parliament some of whom he had taken with him on foreign trips. But the right way to reward them is not to make them ministers or ministers of state outright but to make them parliamentary secretaries. And that should be done not for a brief period before they are elevated to ministership but for a reasonably long time. They should be put to work to solve some of the basic problems of poverty through field work and not by issuing directives.

We will not get a better parliament by paying its members lavishly but by making it meet for long hours and discuss the problems of the country and find their real solutions. We need a working parliament and not a dispersing parliament as few members have real interest in its debate or decisions.