

Creative Destruction

Towards a National Think Tank

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Responding to three articles that appeared in the EPW (13 September 2014) by Nachane, Shah and Mehrotra, the authors call for clarity and debate on the ethos of the new “think tank” that is to be instituted in the place of the Planning Commission of India.

One of the several highlights of the prime minister’s Independence Day address was his bold and historic announcement about the creative destruction of the Planning Commission. He desired to replace it with a new institution having “a new design and structure, a new body, a new soul, a new thinking, and a new direction”. He also said that the new institution should lead the country, based on “creative thinking, public-private partnership, optimum utilisation of resources, utilisation of youth power of the nation, and empower the federal structure”.

Ever since, several suggestions on the shape, nature, and functions of the new body have appeared in the media. The *Economic & Political Weekly* (13 September 2014) has published three articles from eminent and experienced authors. While one (Dilip M Nachane, “Yojana Bhawan: Obiter Dictum”) dwells at length on the excellent legacy of the Planning Commission, its motivations and vision, and consequently argues for retaining much of the old system within which the Planning Commission was – as the author argues – successful, the other two (Rajeeva Ratna Shah, “Reorienting the Plan Process and Revitalising the Planning Commission”, and Santosh Mehrotra, “The Reformed ‘Planning Commission’: The Way Forward”) propose bolder reforms. While Mehrotra argues for learning from the Chinese system, Shah questions the utility of any reformed entity unless the very processes of the current top-down planning are inverted and are made “bottom-up”. Together, these three authors lay out a useful commentary on the changing context, and spell out some details of how the new think tank could be made to work better, what functions it should undertake and also about some

important operational features such as staffing.

However, we believe there are two key elements of any formulation of the new national think tank that are not addressed, except perhaps through stretched implication of some suggestions. One is the set of core values and principles that we believe any entity must embody, and they should be explicitly mentioned in the vision and mission statement of the new entity. Unfortunately, not much attention is paid to the vision and mission statement, and the core values that the institution embodies, which often leaves the institution vulnerable to the personality attributes of changing leadership, and in the worst case, open to manipulation and abuse in the long run in a dynamic political context such as ours. Second, even though the new entity seems to completely replace the Planning Commission, it still would operate in the existing context, and as such should recognise, support and leverage the national resources of think tanks that the new entity does not seek to replace. Promotion of a culture of excellence in public policy research, which has a rich history in India, must not only be protected, but adequately supported to leapfrog into world-class institutions. In putting forward these two specific dimensions of the new national think tank, we draw upon our experience of having worked and engaged with various think tanks in India and abroad, both in the capacity of managers of think tanks, and in supporting them to strengthen organisational systems, structures, and their effectiveness in public policy engagement.

First, there is merit in the think tank option outlined by the prime minister. The new institution should also be shaped like a think tank in a sharp break from the past. Because structural change is not systemic change, much less a change in institutional culture. What is now required is a change in the culture of planning, and imbibing a culture of “honour of national service” in line with the current prime minister’s vision. The present government is characterised by

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a strong Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Therefore, there is a need for a strong institution to support the PMO with informed and objective analyses, to independently evaluate results of publicly-funded national schemes and to use this institutional mechanism to strengthen federal functioning. How effective are the mega welfare schemes on which we spend billions of Indian taxpayers' rupees? Or, what is the optimal mechanism for allocation of natural resources; when do auctions work and when do they not?

The government needs unbiased and rigorous analyses of these issues to enrich its decision-making process, more as inputs into policymaking rather than prescriptive advice. Such analyses will also help to build public consensus for government decisions. Such studies often require sophisticated skills for analysis and assessment, cutting across multiple disciplines. Such evidence-based knowledge as inputs into policymaking is increasingly required from a government and a nation that aspires for a growing national economy and welfare and a rising role in international affairs.

Moreover, we have the historic opportunity to start afresh. No matter what the shape, there is one aspect of any institution that defines its ethos, i.e., the core values and principles that it stands for. These values alone are the hallmark of the underlying vision of its founder for time immemorial. Core values are not only guides and the moral compass, especially in times of internal crises, but also act as boundaries and limits under despotic or wavering leadership. This is important when we know how practices have significantly departed from intents. Therefore, before having any discussions on the shape and architecture of the national institution, it is crucial to outline the core values of the institution. In our opinion, these should comprise at least the following principles, viz, transparency, accountability and highest ethical standards; work ethic guided by honour of national service (in line with prime minister's speech); highest quality standards in processes and outputs, including through promotion of an internal culture of a continuously learning

organisation; composition and functioning should reflect India's rich diversity across multiple dimensions; and internationalism and federalism should be defining features for all approaches.

For an Outstanding Institution

So, how do we translate the prime minister's lofty vision into developing a high quality institution, which will serve the country for years to come? A high quality think tank should be a centre of bubbling new energy, innovation and excellence. The success of a think tank directly depends on the quality and motivation of its manpower. Moreover, it should maintain its quality and standards over a long period of time.

We believe this can be achieved by adopting a two-layer model. One, the institution itself should have a lean structure and house qualified domain experts and talented researchers. Simultaneously, it should adequately strengthen and leverage the rich network of think tanks in the country and the region.

The institution should attract the best talent and qualified manpower from India and abroad to work on challenging national problems. The researchers should be from diverse backgrounds including economics, social sciences, sciences, engineering, and law. Therefore, the institution will have to be flexible in its terms of appointment and recruitment. Moreover, the staff should be appointed for limited tenures so as to ensure vibrancy and avoid stagnancy.

The institution should have a "problem solving" approach, which suggests meaningful and pragmatic solutions to important problems. Often, think tanks fall into a trap of merely highlighting the problems or suggesting options, which are not always feasible. If the ministries have to take notice of the institution, they should find the analyses relevant and practical.

Second, in addition to having in-house expertise, there is a great opportunity to leverage on the rich tapestry of think tanks existing nationally and also regionally. India has a large number of think tanks, and there is an opportunity to use their knowledge and expertise. The ongoing Think Tank Initiative (TTI)

programme being managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, provides useful insights on how the new institution could play the role of a mentor and a critical ally to the network of excellent think tanks that are engaged in public policy in India and the immediate neighbourhood.

Think tanks are most effective and useful when they are financially sustainable and independent of influence, including from funding bodies. A provision of long term, predictable, core support to think tanks, with complete institutional ownership, is critical for the success of think tanks. Most think tanks depend on project funding, mostly from international sources. The TTI made core, long-term grants of up to CAD 20 million to 16 think tanks in south Asia (nine of which are in India). The process of selecting the qualifying think tanks was rigorous, and objective. Once selected, the think tanks continued to be rigorously and comprehensively monitored on the objectives they had set for themselves. Following nearly five years of support – with another four or more years ahead – the selected think tanks are reporting progress and success.

The new institution should therefore embed in itself a mechanism to support diversity of independent and successful think tanks in India and the region. A suitable and comprehensive mechanism for selection, monitoring and evaluation of think tanks in India and the region could be institutionalised within the new institution. The existing national institutions for promoting research and public policy engagement in India could be taken advantage of.

This is a historic opportunity that rarely comes in the life of a nation. Institutions are also not built in one day. The prime minister has created this opportunity in our republic. Critical thinking must inform the architecture and design, but it is the underlying core values that define the character of the institution.

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