Through American Eyes


This report has been written for Indian Ministers and Indian administrative officials" is the first sentence of Mr. Appleby's foreword. Anyone condemned to peruse the report is compelled to come to the conclusion that most Ministers and not a few administrative officers confronted with it will heartily wish that it had been written for someone else. Neither the involved arrangement of the matter nor the equally involved American professional style in which it is written is an aid to reading or understanding. Mr. Appleby quite often does not deal with a subject in one place, say all he has to about it and pass on. He prefers to scatter remarks about it in several sections, leaving the reader to gather what impression he can, and he actually seems to be proud of this method of treatment, "at a good many places in these pages, I have dealt somewhat casually with...". All in all, it may be said that this is a difficult and in places obscure report to read, a difficult report to grasp and that when the considerable labour of reading and understanding has been undertaken, the result is by no means rewarding.

Perhaps the most convenient way of finding a path through this bristling undergrowth—brevity in 30,000 words as stated in Mr. Appleby's letter to the Finance Minister—is to consider the 12 "definite and particular" recommendations listed not as one would normally expect at the end of the report but on its 13th, 14th and 15th pages. The introductory sentence to the list of recommendations is worth noting "I hope that my entire report will be suggestive in many, often indefinite and sometimes subtle, ways beyond those which I make explicit". Mr. Appleby obviously has a high opinion of his own report. In his view it seems to be a kind of Bible that will create and spread an influence of its own to pervade the entire governmental system.

The first of Mr. Appleby's recommendations is the creation of an Organisation and Management or a Public Administrative Office under a Minister with strong government backing, to continuously study improvement of governmental structures and administrative methods and manners. The Organisation and Methods idea is nothing new. As long ago as November 1947 the Officers' Shortage Committee recommended the formation of a special organisation for the purpose under a secretary. The report on Public Administration presented to the Planning Commission in April 1951 said "the lesson of the last four years is that an expert, co-ordinated and continuous body must exist which plans, supervises and constantly adapts to changing needs all the arrangements necessary for proper training, proper organisation and proper methods of work".

That report placed the body under the very special high level Minister and Secretary Board of two, who were to "generate the drive and direction needed for constant adaptation of central and state governments to such structural forms, administrative methods, etc. as have been designed for bringing about greater administrative efficiency". Mr. Appleby thus merely says in a different language what these two reports have already said.

Those making appointments are apt to perpetuate their like. This tendency in Mr. Appleby's case seems responsible for his second recommendation. He has reported individually, but he would now like a team of outside experts to make further and more specialised studies as a sequel to his report. That too without any loss of time, unless the somewhat obscure words "as desirable sooner than a new O and M office would be equipped for them..." mean something different from what ordinarily might be inferred from them. According to Mr. Appleby's conception, the Organisation and Methods office of the first recommendation is to provide continuous employment for the outside experts of the second. It is to be hoped that even the Government of India will shudder at the dreadful prospect of a stream of reports similar to this appearing in the guise of specialised studies by a team of outside experts.

Community projects are a very new development. 1952 saw their birth. Mr. Appleby is right in suggesting considerable simplification of the supervision over them, entrusting of power to one head rather than to the Planning Commission, reduction in the number of advisory committees and boards at all levels and a simple channel of responsibility. It is refreshing to find an original suggestion of his with which there can be wholehearted agreement.

There is nothing new in Mr. Appleby's next recommendation. More than one report in the past...
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has stressed the need and pointed out the detailed steps for what he calls "reducing inter-ministerial involvements and reviews". Much too has been said in previous reports about the need for encouraging officials at different levels to take responsibility and not to pass the buck and concrete suggestions have been made for speed and efficiency in work.

Mr Appleby's seventh suggestion making "hierarchies have a more truly pyramidal form with more executives at most levels" is but a complicated way of saying more officers and possibly less clerks. This concept, well-known in Whitehall, was put forward in reports of the twenties and thirties here and has been much discussed. There seemed a chance of its being put into practice in India before the 1939 war but with the extra work and the shortage of officers the war brought, it was dropped for the time being. It might well be followed with advantage as soon as a sufficient number of young officers are available.

There is no more confused section of the report than that which deals with Mr Appleby's eighth recommendation about eliminating fixed cadres and recruiting flexibly. In some places he almost seems to doubt the desirability of permanent civil servants being non-partisan and outside politics, and to bemoan the idea common in American politics that no policy can be carried out except by those completely sold to it, which leads to the changing not only of the political but also of the principal administrative appointments with each change of the party in power. Not going as far as that, he then seems to want, though making no specific suggestion, to abandon all distinctive classifications such as cadres, officers, clerks, and leaves us in some doubt as to whether he would not prefer a system in which any peon could be promoted to secretary or any secretary demoted to clerk. Permanence he does not like. Security seems to him obnoxious. To attach proper importance to these seems to him likely to cause "loss in government dynamism". Having thrashed around a good deal he makes one might almost say as usual when dealing with difficult questions—no definite suggestion. The only inference that can reasonably be drawn from the section is that Mr Appleby, himself an academician perhaps pitchforked into government service for a few years, dislikes the permanent government service. He does not seem to realise that it has in all ranks often done for this country work of the highest order and enabled stability to be maintained in the most difficult times, thus making the country an exception to the general failure of law and order and comparative break-up of civilised life which we see in many other areas of South East Asia today. The luring and firing practices of his native land seem to have for him a tremendous fascination.

Mr Appleby's ninth recommendation is a repetition of a suggestion put in simpler and more understandable language in previous reports. Mr Appleby would next like all taxes to be collected as they become due and for that purpose would like large numbers of officials to be recruited. The Government of India have always accepted the aim of prompt collection. Since, however, in income-tax the amounts due and number of assesses increased several fold during the war and it takes five years to make an income-tax officer, there is bound to be a certain lag. Mr Appleby would also like to get over the reluctance of the states to raise the rates of land taxes and to impose an agricultural income tax. He suggests that the administration of tax collection in the states should also be improved. Obviously all very ordinary and desirable measures, regarding which his general aspirations would have been much more valuable if he had suggested useful concrete steps, at least as regards the first two. The last of Mr Appleby's recommendations is that there should be adequate methods of checking, both during and after the performance of official action, a suggestion with which everybody can agree. His principal method would be simultaneous, instead of post, audit and such a division of functions and responsibilities that several people are concerned in the doing of one thing, probably involving large increase in staff.

This review suffices to show that the report is not the work of a brilliant, original, or even particularly clear, mind. Considerable confusion is apparent in regard to the theory of administration itself, supposed to be Mr Appleby's strongest point according to the recent statement of the Finance Minister.

Mr Appleby reverts again and again in his report to the division of powers and functions between the centre and the states. In his view the present arrangement leaves the centre unable to compel the states to take action in matters within their sphere and is therefore likely to affect the implementation of the Plan. As usual, he has no remedy to suggest. He seems content to hope that the present "extraordinary" political leadership will do something. While this is undoubtedly an important matter, Mr Appleby does not seem to realise that in the last resort the use of power depends upon the ability and character of the user. There is little to show that the centre has exercised even the powers it is invested with in such a manner as to evoke confidence in its ability to exercise with effect any greater powers that may be allowed to it. Moreover, there is bound to be a certain amount of jealousy about the ceding of powers to a central authority when the constituent units in a federal state are not so much homogeneous as heterogeneous groups. Canada is a case in point, though there the problem is in a way simpler, only two main groups, English and French, being concerned.

The lack of understanding that is so marked a characteristic of the whole report is very apparent in Mr Appleby's remarks on governmental enterprises. To Mr Appleby the whole idea of autonomous corporations is anathema. He would like everything to be run departmentally!

His approach to corruption, probably the most important administrative disease of this country, is also exceedingly superficial. He is not particularly troubled about corruption in high places. He discounts completely the effect of example. The mental climate of the areas in which he has worked has perhaps become so attuned to an easy condonation of corrupt practices among the powerful that corruption at similar levels in India hardly seems to him worthy of much consideration. Obviously accustomed to regard corruption as a part of normal political life, he would much rather throw bouquets at Ministers and high officials than discuss how they can be prevented from being corrupt.

To sum up, few more pretentious and less meritorious documents than this report have ever been fathered upon even the gullible Government of India.