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The second chair: On Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker

Convention of electing the Deputy Speaker from the Opposition should be upheld
More than a year after the 17th Lok Sabha was constituted, the constitutionally mandated post of Deputy Speaker is lying vacant. This unusual situation is in the spotlight as the monsoon session of Parliament begins on Monday and the Rajya Sabha is scheduled to elect a Deputy Chairman. The vacancy of Deputy Speaker appears to be less of a lapse, and more a calculated delay by the ruling BJP. On September 9, the Congress leader in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, **wrote to Speaker Om Birla to initiate the process**, by election or consensus. Mr. Chowdhury also recalled the convention of offering the post to the Opposition. Mr. Birla has been **non-committal in his public comments on the issue**, and the BJP has remained silent. Soon after the 2019 general election, the government had made some effort to fill the position. It had approached the YSR Congress, which **reportedly turned it down** since it would have been difficult to align their protest against the government for not according special status to Andhra Pradesh with occupying the post. While the Congress has been forceful in raising the issue, other Opposition parties have been less enthusiastic. In the Rajya Sabha, the **JD(U)'s Harivansh**, who has been re-elected to the House, is **seeking re-election as Deputy Chairman** as the ruling combine's candidate. He had **defeated Congress leader B.K. Hariprasad** — 125-105 votes — in elections in August 2018.

The ruling combine, despite not having a simple majority, has managed to win crucial votes several times over in the past in the Upper House. This time around, BJP leaders have claimed the support of 140 members for Mr. Harivansh. The **RJD's Manoj Jha**, an erudite member in the Opposition, is the joint candidate of 12 parties for the post. There was confusion within the Opposition ranks on whether this contest was worth it. Several of their senior members are likely to skip the session, considering the risk of COVID-19 infection. The BSP, which has remained a reluctant Opposition party, is unlikely to be different this time. The BJP has taken its overwhelming parliamentary majority as a justification for disregarding not only the Opposition but also parliamentary conventions. Its refusal to engage the Opposition in electing a Deputy Speaker is further eroding the common ground that India sorely requires to deal with the multitude of its current challenges. The BJP's pre-eminence has also devastated the Opposition which is struggling to muster a coherent and united response. Election by consensus of an Opposition MP as Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha will be a course correction. The government should be magnanimous and the Opposition creative in dealing with this issue.

Long haul ahead: On demand-supportive fiscal policies

Demand-supportive fiscal policies alone can end the lockdown-induced slowdown

Factory output continued to contract in July, albeit marginally slower than in June, reflecting the depressed economic conditions as the pandemic rages on. Quick estimates for the IIP show output across the three sectoral components of the index — mining, manufacturing and electricity — all shrank, dragging the overall index to a 10.4% year-on-year contraction. While this is slower than June's 15.8% shrinkage, a closer look reveals that the rebound in momentum witnessed in the fiscal first quarter's last month — when the economy reopened and the contraction narrowed sharply from May's 33.9% fall — has dissipated appreciably. The most telltale sign of this flattening is the more than halved pace of growth in the solitary use-based industrial activity of the IIP's six product groups, in which output had turned positive in June. Growth in consumer non-durables — it includes essential household consumables — slid back to 6.7% from the preceding month's 14.3%, betraying the abiding weakness in private consumption spending. The other five groups posted double-digit contractions, with consumer durables and capital goods shrinking 23.6% and 22.8%, respectively. If the trend in durables attests to the RBI's evaluation last month that “private consumption has lost its discretionary elements across the board”, the capital goods data point to a dismal picture on the investment front. With demand-starved companies operating their factories well below capacity, there is little indication that the protracted six-quarter slump in this key sector, which encompasses the plants and machinery that manufacturers order when expanding or starting new ventures, is anywhere close to reversing momentum.

Electricity generation, however, provides some relief, with the contraction narrowing to 2.5% in July from June's 10%. A deeper look at the 23 subcategories of manufacturing shows that only tobacco products and pharmaceuticals posted expansions in July, with the latter benefitting from the increased global demand for medicines, including generic drugs, in the wake of the pandemic. The manufacture of pharmaceuticals, medicinal chemical and botanical products climbed 22% in July, making it the solitary product to post an expansion of 1.8% over April-July. Textiles and garment manufacturing, employment intensive segments shrank to 14.8% and 28.7%, respectively. To be sure, the IIP data come with a lag of six weeks and a few more recent indicators give room for some guarded hope. For one, the latest IHS Markit India Manufacturing PMI survey-based outlook signals that the sector likely posted some expansion for the first time in five months in August. And auto makers reported growth in shipments of passenger vehicles to dealers last month in anticipation of festive season demand. Still, to help sustain any incipient revival, the Centre will need to enact demand-supportive fiscal policies or risk seeing the slowdown prolong.

The Government and Opposition should engage constructively in truncated Parliament session



The desultory manner in which the upcoming Parliament session is being approached in the world's largest democracy is in sharp contrast to the vibrancy of such proceedings almost everywhere else

The Monsoon Session of Parliament convenes belatedly on Monday morning in exceptionally challenging times, with India facing its worst economic crisis in recent history and the Covid-19 pandemic clocking the highest number of cases and deaths in the world per day. The much-curtailed session is set to debate and pass 17 of the pending 46 bills that have been listed for consideration and passage and 23 new bills listed for introduction, consideration and passage in barely 18 sittings between September 14 and October 1. The question hour has been suspended and the zero hour cut by half by the Government which is focussed on getting the 11 ordinances, including the Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020, Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (Amendment) Ordinance, pushed through Parliament. The Health Minister is to make a statement with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic and the steps taken by the Government while the Finance Minister will present the first batch of supplementary demands for grants for 2020-21. The Government is clear that the business of Parliament should be executed with minimum fuss.

If the Government comes across as a trifle minimalist in fulfilling its Parliamentary duties, the Opposition's listlessness is equally apparent. The Congress, in its seemingly perpetual state of internal combustion, has snubbed a majority of its star performers in both the Houses — Ghulam Nabi Azad, Anand Sharma, Shashi Tharoor — just days ahead of the Session. If that was not enough, the interim President of the Congress, Sonia Gandhi, has embarked on a journey abroad for medical reasons and her son, Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi, is to accompany her. So the principal opposition party will be headless during the course of this session. The rest, Trinamool Congress, Left, DMK *et al* will be so restricted by the logistics that only token presence of the Opposition is likely to be felt — although they have jointly moved statutory resolutions against all 11 ordinances listed by the Government. Most senior

parliamentarians are likely to stay away from the Houses for fear of contracting the pandemic. Even so, the Opposition and the government should engage constructively — the Opposition should hold the Centre to account on its Budget estimates, and whether they need to be reconsidered in the context of Covid, and its handling of the pandemic. The desultory manner in which the upcoming Parliament session is being approached in the world's largest democracy is in sharp contrast to the vibrancy of such proceedings almost everywhere else. There have been intense discussions around public policy throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, France, Italy, New Zealand, Australia and Canada, where parliaments have held sessions in person with social distancing, or video conferencing or a hybrid model. India need not have insisted on physical presence of legislators. But having made the decision, it is now incumbent upon MPs to discuss, debate and find solutions to the present crisis with the urgency that it requires.