

## VOICE OF INCLUSION

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

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A watchful Parliament forms the foundation of a well-functioning democracy. The presiding officers of Parliament are the key to securing the effectiveness of this institution. The MPs look to them to facilitate debate, protect their rights and uphold the dignity of Parliament. On Wednesday, Lok Sabha MPs are set to elect one amongst themselves, to play the pivotal role of the presiding officer for the 17th Lok Sabha.

The primary challenge before the new Speaker will be to conduct the proceedings of the Lok Sabha free from disruptions. To do so, the Speaker will have to earn the trust of the Members of Parliament: One way to earn the trust of MPs will be by being neutral, both in practice and perception while running the House.

Securing the neutrality of the Speaker is a question that experts in India have been grappling with for 60-plus years. In Britain, the promise of continuity in office for many terms is used to ensure the Speaker's impartiality. By convention, political parties (usually) do not field a candidate against the Speaker at the time of general elections. And the Speaker can continue in office, until deciding otherwise. By convention, the Speaker also gives up the membership of his/her political party.

The first Speaker of the Lok Sabha, G V Mavalankar, was aware that the British convention for securing the neutrality of the Speaker might not be an easy sell in the nascent years of our democracy. In his 1952 acceptance speech as Speaker of the first Lok Sabha, he said: "We have yet to evolve political parties and healthy conventions about Speakership, the principle of which is that, once a Speaker he is not opposed by any party in the matter of his election, whether in the constituency or in the House, so long as he wishes to continue as Speaker." He went on to say, "to expect the Speaker to be out of politics altogether without the corresponding convention is perhaps entertaining contradictory expectations."

In 1951 and 1953, the Conference of Presiding Officers of legislatures in India passed a resolution for the adoption of the British Convention. Mavalankar tried to create a consensus among political parties on adopting this British convention but was unable to make much headway. The 1954 decision of the Working Committee of Congress in response to Mavalankar's attempts sealed the fate of the issue. It stated, "The Working Committee considered Shri G V Mavalankar's letter for establishing a convention for the uncontested election of Speakers and felt that this was not a feasible proposition for the present in view of other political parties being involved in the question."

With no security in the continuity of office, the Speaker is dependent on his or her political party for reelection. This makes the Speaker susceptible to pulls and pressures from her/his political party in the conduct of the proceedings of the Lok Sabha.

[Jawaharlal Nehru](#) alluded to this aspect of the Speaker's responsibility in 1948. At the unveiling of the portrait of Vithalbai Patel, he said: "We would like the distinguished occupant of this chair

now and always to guard the freedom and liberty of those from every possible danger, even from the danger of an executive incursion. There is always that danger even from a National Government — that it may choose to ride roughshod over the opinions of a minority, and it is here that the Speaker comes in to protect each single member, or each single group from any such unjust activity by a dominant group or a dominant government.”

Other than the election of Mavalankar, every other Lok Sabha Speaker has been elected unanimously. After the election, the Speaker is escorted to her/his chair by the leaders of both the ruling and opposition party. These conventions are meant to reflect that after her/his election, the Speaker belongs to the entire House. For the next five years, all her/his actions will be weighed on the scale of neutrality. She/ he will have to be vigilant to defend the sanctity of the institution and also have the vision to strengthen it. In this challenging journey, her/his guiding light will be the Constitution and the rules of procedure of Lok Sabha.

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