

# Election Commission of India

NAME OF THE NEWSPAPER

THE TIMES OF INDIA

DATE: 11 5 NOV 2012

Government faces flak over multi-member CAG controversy

## Three heads better than one

## Ploy to clip CAG's wings

With the government under fire from the opposition and civil society, the controversy surrounding the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) needs to be seen in the right perspective. Minister of state in the PMO V Narayanasamy's statement – which he later recanted – that the government was actively considering the recommendation of the Shunglu committee report to make the CAG a three-member body akin to the Election Commission (EC) couldn't have come at a worse time. With the CAG highlighting several cases of financial bungling ranging from 2G spectrum licensing to coal block allocations, the comment was bound to be seen as a move to stymie the CAG. However, the Shunglu committee recommendation, which predated the CAG controversy, isn't bad in principle.

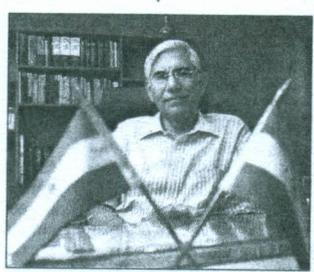
Since its inception, the CAG is one constitutional set-up that has escaped broad-basing of its selection process and terms of service. This, despite the fact that the mandate of the CAG – to audit the accounts of the Union and state governments – is quite substantial and getting increasingly complex.

In such a scenario, three heads could prove to be more efficient than one, boosting transparency in government accounting. The argument that a multi-member CAG would dilute its efficacy doesn't cut ice. Institutions cannot depend on individual

### ■ TIMES VIEW ■

personalities to function optimally. A consultative approach would impart vibrancy both in terms of work culture and ideas.

Officers such as former chief election commissioners TN Seshan and JM Lyngdoh – credited with electoral reforms in the country – have had to work within a consultative framework with other election commissioners. Importantly, the BJP too has favoured broad-basing the selection process of the CAG – who is currently appointed by the government – with leaders like L K Advani calling for a collegium system. A multi-member CAG is a logical part of the same reform.



The timing of the UPA government's clumsy suggestion to make the CAG a multi-member body is undoubtedly suspect. The controversial proposal comes on the back of the government's acidic

### ■ COUNTERVIEW ■

Meghna Roy

observations about the CAG's functioning, accusing Vinod Rai of transgressing his mandate. It's now public knowledge that CAG reports on 2G spectrum and coal allocations have hugely embarrassed the ruling dispensation, besides creating a public stir on policy matters. Rai, on his part, has publicly slammed the government to the extent of saying that he finds its 'brazenness' in decision-making 'appalling'.

Given the sharpness of these exchanges, the Congress's sudden talk about restructuring the CAG, does raise a couple of pertinent questions: What's

the government's real intention? Is it to democratise the CAG's functioning or to clip the wings of its head, determined to expose financial bungling? Nobody can deny that Rai has shaken up the inert political and bureaucratic establishments, fuelling a public discourse about government's policy transaction. In this respect, the CAG is following in the footsteps of former chief election commissioners TN Seshan and JM Lyngdoh, who in their time had redefined the Election Commission (EC) as an institution.

Recall that Seshan had faced similar political ire when he single-handedly managed the EC. Wary of his strict enforcement of code of conduct and electoral reforms, political parties made the commission a multi-member body – precisely to clip Seshan's wings. Rai is confronting a Seshan-like situation. Given the proposal's timing and the government's public criticism of Rai, it would be naive not to read the government's oblique message and take the suggestion at its face value.