



Disclosing — and concealing

Make politicians' asset disclosures clearer, and follow up

In an important move towards transparency, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last year reminded his council of ministers to declare their assets, movable and immovable, and said that the declarations would be put up online. Declarations for 2012 are now online and these should be welcome. But they also reveal that many lacunae remain in terms of full and clear disclosure.

The most obvious point is, of course, that there are no basic requirements to ensure that the ministers' stated value of their property is anything close to the real value. Several ministers, such as Urban Development Minister Kamal Nath, have chosen to put their assets down at "cost" value, which may of course be many degrees removed from those same assets' real, current market value. Dr Singh himself, chose this year to have his immovable properties — a house in Chandigarh and another in Delhi — revalued by a government-approved valuer. In doing so, the value his disclosure assigned them doubled; it is a sad sign of the paucity of common sense and economic logic in much of our public discourse that this move towards greater transparency was reported as if it was a real doubling of Dr Singh's assets. Some ministers have chosen to reveal full details of their families' assets; others have given only their own assets; and some, Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways Jitin Prasada, for example, have not assigned any value to their immovable assets at all. This is inconsistent; the code of conduct for ministers that Dr Singh began to enforce last year specifically mentions the need to disclose all business interests and assets of family members. This exercise will only be incomplete unless there is consistency across disclosures and clarity about the real values of ministers' assets and business interests. Information about the latter is particularly important in order to pin down possible conflicts of interest, which are unfortunately becoming endemic in Indian politics, including at the Centre.

Equally puzzling are the various differences between ministers' disclosures and the affidavits they filed with the Election Commission at the time of the 2009 elections, as is required by law. It is unclear whether these distinctions are because of differing requirements; because one is voluntary and the other a legal document on stamp paper; or as the result of an innocent change in ministers' portfolio. Again, a lack of consistency is hurting a move towards transparency. The election-time affidavits would certainly benefit from requiring government-approved valuation of immovable property in particular. In the absence of such standardisation, the hopeful effects of such transparency — notably, enabling citizens to estimate if their candidates and ministers are enriching themselves unduly, or have inappropriate conflicts of interest — will not be met. This is particularly relevant for ministers. Recent research at the National Bureau of Economic Research has found that non-ministers received no bump to their income from winning elections in India — but ministers' income was 13 to 16 per cent higher than it would otherwise have been. The data needed for voters to judge this for themselves should be clear and consistent, without indulging in obfuscation.