Lateral Entry into the Civil Services

What is the issue?

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- Recently, the government has proposed lateral entry into the civil services.
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- While there are multiple concerns, the idea is neither completely new nor an anathema not should be discarded.
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What is current status of the proposed lateral entry program?

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- **Actions -** The central government recently sent out a notification seeking applications to fill in 10 government posts at the “Joint Secretary” level.
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- This caused anxiety among the bureaucratic ranks, and a retired bureaucrat even filed a writ against it in the Supreme Court.
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- While the bureaucracy clearly feels that its turf is being violated, the response from applicants has been overwhelming.
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- **Perceptions -** Some consider this as the beginning of the end of “neutral and impartial” civil services as loyalists are likely to be inducted into the services.
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- This might also lead to “privatisation of the IAS” as private business houses might succeed in planting their people to influence government policies.
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- But a considerable number of people also think that this is a bold decision to bring in fresh talent, and that it should be given a fair trial.
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What is the strongest argument in support of lateral entry?

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- Higher bureaucracy in the secretariat often has to examine proposals received from specialised departments/corporations.
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- Further, consultations with other ministries/departments are to be made in order to present a report to the concerned minister for his final decision.
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- Thus, a Joint Secretary to the government has the crucial function of giving implementable shape to abstract policy ideas.
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- This is a complex consultative process requiring experience and expertise for which detailed procedures have been formulated.
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- This complexity is what forms the nucleus of the debate on lateral entry.
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- The proponents of lateral entry argue that domain specialists as against generalist career bureaucrats fit the bill better.
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What are views of those who oppose lateral entry?

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- An IAS officer, after years of experience at the field level, does indeed become an expert in public systems on his own right.
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- Further, merely being an expert doctor doesn’t equip one enough to advice on how health policy of the nation should be formulated.
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- **Alternatives –** Rather than lateral entry, it has been suggested to try short term courses for IAS officers to better their domain knowledge during service.
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- Graded training programs could be designed according to governance demands, and the personal interests and aptitude of existing bureaucrats.
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- Ideas have also been advanced for IAS officers to gain work experience and knowledge in diverse domains, which are worth considering.
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- **Introspection -** The bureaucracy needs to introspect on why some officers have become subservient to the political classes despite their stature.
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- Notably, this trend continues even after retirement, as multiple lucrative post retirement options have opened up high profile government officials.
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Is our government machinery bereft of experts presently?

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- Specialists like engineers, doctors, agricultural scientists, lawyers have always had a substantial say in the decision-making and implementation.
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- Besides, Secretaries to the Departments of Atomic Energy, Science & Technology, Scientific and Industrial Research, Health Research, and Agricultural Research have always been scientists of eminence.
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- Similarly, in departments like the Railways, Posts, etc., all senior positions are manned by Indian Railway or Postal Service officers.
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- Therefore, there is nothing very original in the new initiative other than the fact that it has been proposed for a Joint Secretary level entry.
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What is the way ahead?

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- As the number of such lateral entrants increases with time, there is a likelihood of the larger bureaucracy becoming politically biased.
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- This fear could have been allayed if the government considers letting the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) handle the recruitment process.
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- The government should merely define the job requirements explicitly and the UPSC should look for talent that isn’t available within the system.
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- The lateral entry scheme, if implemented properly, may foster more competitive spirit, and break the complacency of the higher civil servants.
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Source: The Hindu

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