Lateral entry - Not The Right Option

What is the issue?

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- The NITI Aayog has recently recommended that “lateral entry” from the private sector should be introduced in the civil services.
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- The PMO is reportedly considering the matter seriously.
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- However, despite the benefits of domain knowledge, the existing generalist nature holds the potential to continue as a system.
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What are the concerns in civil services?

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- Independence is an essential condition for effectiveness of bureaucracy.
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- Unfortunately, the deteriorating quality of political executive has robbed the bureaucracy of its independence and freedom to “speak out its advice”.
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- Political governments have used postings, transfers, re-employment, charge sheets, and of late tickets to elections to influence bureaucrats.
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- The government, instead of addressing these problems, is opting for a quick fix which will further erode the efficiency of the IAS.
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- Notably, the most touted domain knowledge and lateral entry is said to do little to address the present concerns in civil services.
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Why should the present system continue?

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- A rising complaint is that the IAS is lacking domain knowledge in a fast-evolving, technology-driven world.
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- But a deeper look into the demands reveals that domain knowledge may not be the right choice to handle challenges in civil services.
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- **Role** - Technology intersects with the development needs of the common people, which can vary from village to village.
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- Clearly, there can be no one size fits all solutions, no matter how good the technology is.
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- Thus, the civil servant’s role here is that of a synthesiser i.e. to assimilate a technology or idea, adapt it to the local context, and then implement it.
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- One has to be qualified to coordinate the functioning that works through several ministries at the Centre and in the states.
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- E.g. construction of a dam - a lateral entrant would regard this a job for a domain (engineering) expert.
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- On the other hand, a civil servant's role involves in issues with acquisition of land, resettlement and rehabilitation, environmental and social impact assessments, financial planning, negotiating PPPs, etc.
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- Starkly, the limited, one-dimensional vision that technocrats have would make them unsuitable for this role.
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- **Grass-roots experience** - The first 10 years that an IAS officer spends in "the field", exposes her to the dynamics of the actual workings of the government.
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- This is an invaluable input to serve the demands, future in the career at policy-making level.
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- An IAS officer is uniquely qualified for this unlike a lateral entry recruit who would completely lack grass root knowledge.
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- **Representation** - The “domain knowledge” is understood to be technically qualified people from outside.
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- Notably, in recent years there is an increasing percentage of candidates from engineering and medicine backgrounds into the IAS.

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- This gives the service, representations from technical backgrounds, to be made use of, if and when required.
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What is the way ahead?

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- An IAS officer is clearly a domain expert in the most difficult and complex of all domains - the public administration.
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- As, this involves policies, demographics, politics, social imperatives, religion, law and order, etc.
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- A lateral entrant from the private sector is highly doubtful of getting a balanced role in handling all these.
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- Lateral entry would also be a regressive move towards the spoils system, giving the government the freedom to appoint loyalists, favourites and ideological compatibles.
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- The government should thus address the concerns only by vesting more independence with the civil services.
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Source: New Indian Express

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