

## **COVER STORY** **RETIREMENT AGE FOR POLITICIANS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

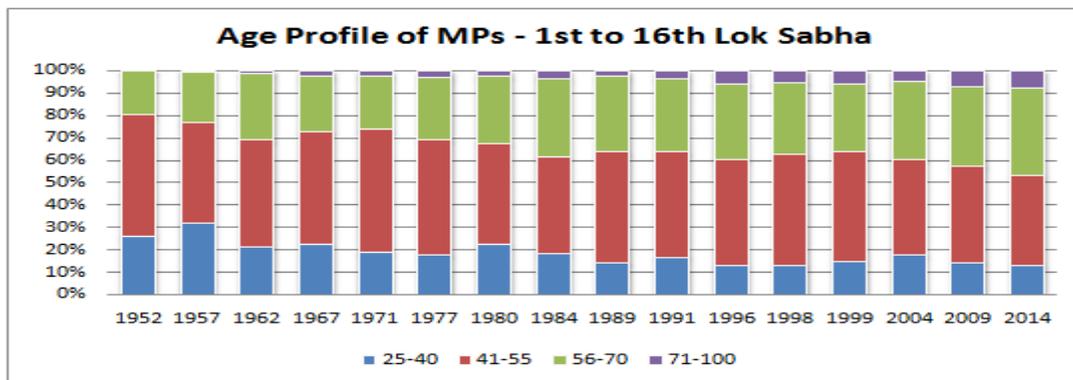
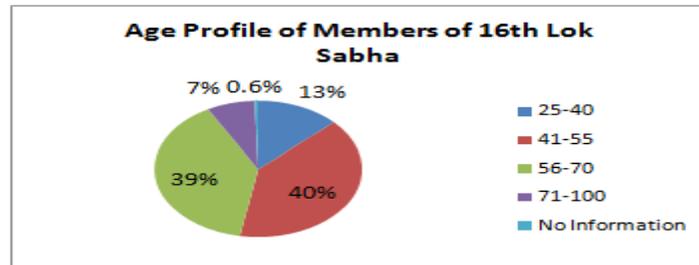
All government officials retire at 56 years in the state, while the public sector employees retire at 58 and the central government employees at 60 years. *Age limits exist for a reason: to encourage the ascension of new talent, eliminate the potential for entrenched privilege, and ensure that the leadership reflects the changing times. After a certain age ones efficiency is considered to reduce and it is time for him/her to retire from work & enjoy the remaining life in peace.* Thus every profession has a retirement age, but when it comes to the rule makers, no retirement age seems to apply. In light of this, there has been a debate on fixing the retirement age of politicians.

### **YOUNG TURKS VS OLD FOGIES: PRESENT SCENARIO**



- **253 (47%)** of the 543 MPs elected to the 16th Lok Sabha are over the age of 55 - the largest number so far in the history of the country. This figure was 43% in the 15th Lok Sabha.
- Interestingly, the Lok Sabha has been getting older every election since independence. While the 1<sup>st</sup> Parliament had no member above the age of 70, the 16th Lok Sabha has **24 members (7 %)** in this age group. Only 71 MPs (13%) have been elected to the Lok Sabha in this election who happen to be under the age of 40.
- This age profile becomes particularly significant in a country like India **where 65 % of the population lies below the age of 35 years and 50 % population lies below the age of 25.**

- However, this change in age profile should also be viewed in light of changing life expectancy. It was 32 at the time of independence and now it stands at 66 years.



**INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO**

- Our Constitution makers, guided by the fact that there is no age limit in the **Westminster model**, did not prescribe an age limit for politicians to hold office. But, by convention all mature democracies have assiduously promoted younger leaders, generally in their early to late forties, in preference to older politicians.
- In UK, out of the last 8 British PMs since 1964, *four had been in their 40s, three in their 50s and just one (John Major) in 60s.*
- Tony Blair was just 43 when he assumed the office of prime minister in 1997 and Bill Clinton was just 46 when he was elected president of the US in 1992. These examples are not exceptions to the rule, but rather the general norm in the West. The US President, Mr Obama, was just 47 when elected and one of the reasons voters elected him is because his rival McCain, at 72, was considered too old.

### **PROPONENTS' ARGUMENTS**

1. We **need young people** to take up senior positions in political arena, which is only possible when elders leave active participation in politics. According to Narayan Murthy, politicians should retire at the age of 60 and act as advisors without playing an active role in governance. He believes, the country needs young brains with great vision that will be given only by the younger generation.
2. After a certain age, people are **prone to age related issues**. Dementia and brain-related atrophy (wasting or decrease in size) are quite common among older people. And thus for the same reason as there is a retirement age in other employment there should be one for politicians.
3. We have seen enough **family dynasties** in Indian politics and do not need any individual to hold power until the next kin is ready to take up the position. Most of the young leaders are the sons and daughters of heavy weight politicians.
4. Whilst senior politicians would have valuable knowledge & experience, generally they have **a more conventional approach** which acts as a barrier to new thoughts & ideas.
5. Let's move to the **corporate world**. Here shareholders want results. Any sane shareholder would love to have a Narayan Murthy or a Ratan Tata run the business for ever. All these are men of great stature. But these men still retire - irrespective of the wants of shareholders. A law is to be followed. So we would want the same law to be applied to politicians.
6. Having a set retirement age for politicians would also ensure that a person knows that his reign of power would end at a definite point of time and he may have to **answer for any misappropriation** sooner rather than later.

### **OPPONENTS' ARGUMENTS**

1. Politicians are representatives of the public. In reality they are public servants in service as long as the **public considers them as suitable**. If the public is willing to stomach an old person running for office, then how can they be deprived of the choice by an arbitrary age limit in a liberal democracy? If the public does not think they are suitable to perform required duties due to their age, then they would not elect them as their representative in elections.

2. Over the years, politician acquires great **knowledge & experience**, which can't be easily replaced. Younger people in the party who lack legislative & administrative experience would *need hand holding & direction*, this would be difficult without the knowledge & experience of veteran politicians.
3. **Inefficiency is not a virtue of age always.** Sardar Patel was 72 when he became the first home minister. Look at the old E Sridharan, who has handled the gigantic metro project involving tenders of more than Rs. 20,000 crores, but is not touched by corruption of even a single paisa. Mr A B Vajpaye was one of the PM widely respected by all parties due to his extra ordinary sound leadership. So, age cannot be a bar, albeit what matters is competency and character.
4. Also, politics is **not a 10 am to 5 pm kind of job**. So it should not be compared to other office jobs like bureaucracy, public sector jobs etc.
5. Negating someone just because he is old and can't come up with fresh ideas is perhaps insulting **human mind**. Out of box thinking comes by enlightened, erudite, scholarly and accommodating minds not by youth alone.
6. In India, there is **reluctance on the part of youth** to take over the political reins. After much persuasion and pressure for years there is some forward movement in some states recently. Further, there is **no sign of desirable performance** on their part of youth who got opportunities. Most of them are sleepy listeners or absentee parliamentarians. Thus, it is better to allow elders to lead the politics.
7. Loosing senior politicians may also impact on **public acceptability of the political party**, as there is a element of individual trust and goodwill involved.
8. It is also argued that **politics is not a profession, but a service**. Hence, age is not an issue if one is medically and physically fit.

### **WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION**

Looking at the proponents as well as opponents arguments, it is obvious that we need both old experience and young brains in the politics. The legacy and profound knowledge of the elder politicians cannot be denied. *When in the USA the debate is on to increase the retirement age to 75 because the life expectancy is growing and the citizens remain in their productive age for longer, we should not be talking about curtailing it.* But at the same time young people needs to be encouraged to take part in active politics which can bring in new perspective and technological solutions to contemporary issues.

Thus, it is immaterial whether you fix a legal formal age for politicians. What is required is to create a conducive environment for young people to rise legitimately and become young leaders. This kind of environment can be created in following ways –

1. **Internal democracy** is brought in within all political parties, providing no space to dynastic politics. There may be introduced a mechanism in all political parties to field a certain percentage of their candidates from youth.
2. **Empower local govt** where young people can make a mark. In Western countries, Mayors are very well known public figure. But in India, even the best educated people can't name the mayor of Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay etc.
3. **Promoting Meritocracy:** These days networks, money etc are required to occupy important party positions which stifle the chances of bright candidates. This sort of oligarchy needs to be replaced by meritocracy.
4. **Senior Leaders Should Not Act Like A Banyan Trees:** Like great banyan trees, political patriarchs often destroy all that dares grow in its vicinity — except, of course, for their chosen spawn. These leaders should make way for younger ones once they become mentally and physically inactive. They must occupy a back seat then to advice and mentor the young naives and contribute indirectly in politics as we cannot afford to lose the granular ideas and term them listless in any case. Our older leaders should be guided by people such as Nelson Mandela, who voluntarily demitted office of the President in South Africa. He could have easily remained President for life, but instead chose Thabo Mbeki to succeed him.

In these ways, we can have good amalgamation of experience and energy. Further, voters need to be made literate and aware so that they can choose the best candidates for their constituency.