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The Executive: PMO, Cabinet and Central Secretariat

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“The government” isn’t one person. It’s a whole machine: the PMO, the Cabinet, a much bigger Council of Ministers, and thousands of civil servants who actually carry out every decision.

> **The Cabinet isn’t the whole Council** The Cabinet is a small senior group inside the much larger Council of Ministers.
> **The PMO isn’t a ministry** It’s the Prime Minister’s own personal staff and advisory team — not a formal ministry.
> **Two different Secretariats** The Cabinet Secretariat coordinates at the top. The Central Secretariat runs each ministry underneath.
> **Council size has a legal cap** The 91st Amendment capped the Council of Ministers at 15% of the Lok Sabha’s strength.

PMO: Prime Minister’s Office — the PM’s own personal staff and advisors, not a government ministry.

Collective responsibility: The rule that the whole government stands or falls together, answerable to Parliament as one body.

Cabinet Secretary: India’s senior-most civil servant, heading the Cabinet Secretariat.

Generalist: An official who rotates through many different jobs over a career, instead of specialising in just one field.

1 The PMO — the PM’s own team

Must Know

- The **Prime Minister's Office (PMO)** is the Prime Minister's own personal staff and advisory team. It's not a ministry in its own right — think of it as the PM's own support office, run by civil servants on loan from across the government.
- A **Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister** heads the PMO. Its staff are officials borrowed from other parts of the government, not permanently hired into the PMO itself.
- Over the decades, the PMO's job has quietly grown far beyond simple support. Today, it actively coordinates policy across ministries. It also directly drives the government's biggest initiatives.

So is the PMO just an office that keeps the PM organised? Not anymore — it's grown into something bigger.

> **Quick check 1.** the PMO is officially a government ministry, like the Ministry of Home Affairs. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How the PMO's role has changed over time

Good to Know

The PMO hasn't always looked the way it does today. Its power has grown, shrunk, and grown again, depending on who ran it.

- Under **Nehru**, there was no strong PMO at all. The PM leaned informally on a few trusted foreign-service officers instead.
- In **1964**, PM **Lal Bahadur Shastri** made the top PMO officer a full **Secretary**, equal in rank to the Cabinet Secretary. That officer, L.K. Jha, began sitting in on Cabinet meetings and shaping policy directly.
- In **1971**, PM **Indira Gandhi** went much further. She created a brand-new top post, **Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister**, and gave it to **P.N. Haksar**. Under Haksar, the PMO (then still called the Prime

Minister's Secretariat) became the single most powerful office in the government, even outranking most ministries.

- In **1977**, new PM **Morarji Desai** deliberately cut the office back down to size. He even renamed it from "Secretariat" to "Office" — the name it still carries today — on purpose, to signal a smaller, less dominant role.
- Since then, the PMO's real influence has kept swinging between these two poles: a lean support office under some PMs, a powerful coordinating hub under others. Today's PMO sits firmly on the powerful end of that scale.

So which version is the "real" PMO — the small support office, or the powerful hub? Neither, permanently. The Constitution never defines the PMO's size or powers at all. It's just a team the sitting PM builds and shapes — so its power always tracks the personality and priorities of whoever is Prime Minister at the time.

3 The Cabinet, the Council, and collective responsibility

Must Know

These two names — Cabinet and Council of Ministers — get mixed up constantly. Here's the actual difference.

- The **Council of Ministers** is the full body named in the Constitution. It includes ministers at all three ranks: **Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, and Deputy Ministers**.
- The **Union Cabinet** is a much smaller, senior group sitting inside that larger Council, holding only the most important portfolios. This inner group is the one that actually makes the government's biggest policy decisions.
- The **91st Amendment, 2003** put a hard legal cap on how big the Council can be. Including the PM, it cannot exceed **15% of the Lok Sabha's total strength**. The goal: stop governments from building oversized ministries just to reward political allies.

> **Quick check 2.** the Cabinet and the Council of Ministers are the exact same body. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Now here's the deeper principle that holds the whole Cabinet system together.

- India's Cabinet system rests on one core idea: **collective responsibility**. The whole government stands or falls together. It answers to Parliament as one body, not minister by minister.
- In practice, this means every minister must publicly back a Cabinet decision once it's made — even one they privately argued against behind closed doors. A minister who genuinely can't support a decision has only one real option left: **resign**.

- **UPSC CSP 2017** tested this directly — the answer is collective responsibility, not “speed of decision-making” or “personal power held by the PM.”

4 The two Secretariats

Good to Know

- The **Cabinet Secretariat** supports the Cabinet directly. It coordinates between ministries and helps carry out Cabinet decisions. The **Cabinet Secretary** heads this office — India’s senior-most civil servant, who also leads coordination during major emergencies.
- The **Central Secretariat** is a much bigger machine, sitting behind the ministries themselves. Career civil servants staff it. They prepare files, advise ministers, and actually carry out government decisions on the ground.
- **The easiest way to remember the difference:** the Cabinet Secretariat coordinates at the very top, across ministries. The Central Secretariat administers within each individual ministry.

5 A strong PMO: what it buys, and what it costs

Good to Know

- A more powerful PMO can coordinate faster across ministries. It lets the government make and carry out big decisions quickly and consistently, instead of waiting for slow agreement between ministries.
- But that same concentration of power has a cost. It can push individual ministries and their ministers aside, pulling real decision-

making power away from the departments actually responsible for a subject.

- This is a genuine trade-off: fast, centralised coordination versus spread-out ministerial power. It's a real governance debate — not a case where one side is obviously right.

6 In the news: a new Cabinet Secretary, and a second Principal Secretary

Current Affairs

- On **22 February 2025**, former RBI Governor **Shaktikanta Das** was appointed Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister — a real, current example of the PMO structure described above.
- Das now serves alongside **Pramod Kumar Mishra**, who has held the post since 2019. This marks the **first time in India's history** that a Prime Minister has had two Principal Secretaries at once.
- Separately, **T.V. Somanathan** became the **33rd Cabinet Secretary of India** on **30 August 2024** — the senior-most civil servant, the one this article's Secretariats section describes as heading the Cabinet Secretariat.
- On **13 February 2026**, the PMO itself physically relocated to a new building called **Seva Teerth**, moving out of its long-time home in the South Block of the Secretariat Building.

7 Why power keeps drifting to the centre

Great to Know

- The PMO's growing role isn't unique to India. Many parliamentary democracies show this same pattern. As government grows more complex, real coordinating power tends to shift toward the head of

government's own office — even without any formal change to the Constitution.

- Modern government spans dozens of ministries, all handling overlapping, technical subjects. One coordinating office at the centre becomes genuinely necessary, just to keep policy consistent across all of them.
- The real risk: putting too much coordination in one office can weaken open Cabinet debate. It can also turn individual ministries into places that just carry out decisions made elsewhere, instead of genuinely shaping them.

Think it through. If nothing in the Constitution was formally changed, how did the PMO end up with so much more real power than it started with?

Show the explanation

Because real political power can shift through habit and practice, not just through new laws. As government took on more complex, overlapping issues, someone needed to coordinate across ministries. The PMO sat right next to the Prime Minister, so it was the natural place for that job to land. No law ever formally handed the PMO this power. Ministries simply began routing more decisions through it, because it worked. This matters for exams too: understanding "why" power shifted tells you more than memorising a fixed org chart. The real balance of power can move, even while the written rules stay exactly the same.

8 The civil service's generalist trade-off

Great to Know

- The Central Secretariat runs on a rotation system. Officials — usually IAS officers — move through different ministries over their careers, instead of staying in one field permanently.
- This builds broad, well-rounded experience across government. It also helps stop the kind of long-term networks and corruption that can grow when someone stays too long in one post. But it has a real cost too: an officer who moves every few years may never build the deep expertise a career specialist could build over decades, in a field like tax law or defence buying.
- Every ministry also runs its own smaller offices underneath it, plus a wide network of **Boards and Commissions**. Some of these have a basis in the Constitution. Some exist only because a normal law created them. Some exist purely by government order, with no law behind them at all. Exams often ask which category a given body falls into, since that decides how easily it can be changed or shut down.

Think it through. If specialist expertise is so valuable, why does India deliberately keep rotating its top civil servants instead of letting them build it?

Show the explanation

Because rotation solves a different problem than expertise does. Keeping one official in the same job for decades can build deep, specialist knowledge. But it can also let that official build private networks and favours that are hard to remove later, or even slide into corruption. Moving officials around regularly makes the system harder to capture this way. It also builds administrators who understand how the whole government fits together, not just one narrow slice of it. Neither choice is free. India's system leans toward broad, rotating generalists on purpose. It accepts less deep expertise in exchange for a harder-to-corrupt system. This is a real, ongoing debate about how to run a government well — not a question with one obviously correct answer.

9 How exams test this

Quick Q&A

- **Is the PMO a formal government ministry?** No — it's the Prime Minister's own personal staff and advisory team, not a ministry.
- **What's the difference between the Cabinet and the Council of Ministers?** The Council includes all three ranks of ministers. The Cabinet is a smaller, senior group inside it, holding the most important portfolios.
- **What does the 91st Amendment limit?** The total size of the Council of Ministers — capped at 15% of the Lok Sabha's total strength.

- **Who is India’s Cabinet Secretary, and since when?** T.V. Somanathan, the 33rd Cabinet Secretary, in office since 30 August 2024.

Practice MCQs

1. What does the Cabinet Secretariat do?

A. Replaces the need for individual ministries entirely

B. Only handles the Prime Minister's personal travel arrangements

C. Directly makes all Cabinet-level policy decisions itself

D. Supports the Cabinet's functioning, coordinating between ministries and helping implement Cabinet decisions

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The Cabinet Secretariat supports the Cabinet's functioning. It coordinates between ministries. It also helps implement Cabinet decisions once they are made. ↑ Q1

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2

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