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Extension of Tenure of Standing Committees

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Why in News

The Rajya Sabha Secretariat is considering changing the rules governing the **Departmentally-Related Standing Committees' (DRSC)** tenure to make it to two years from the present one year so that the **panels have enough time** to work on the subjects selected by them.

Key Points

- **Reason for Extension:** The tenure of all the DRSCs of Parliament **is ending** on 11th September, 2020 and they can't hold deliberations till new panels are formed.
 - A significant amount of the tenure of the committees was lost due to the **Covid-19** pandemic.
 - Many of the panels have not been able to complete reports on the subjects they were working on. For example, the **Information Technology panel** could not complete deliberations on **“Safeguarding citizens' rights and prevention of misuse of social/online news media platforms including special emphasis on women security in the digital space”**, for which it summoned Facebook recently.
- **Options Being Considered:**
 - To **extend the term of the panels for a year.**
 - To form **new committees with a fixed tenure of two years.**
- **Origin:** On the recommendation of the Rules Committee of the Lok Sabha, **17 DRSCs** were set up in the Parliament in **1993**. In **2004**, seven more such committees were set up, thus increasing their number from **17 to 24**.
- **Departmental Standing Committees:** Out of the 24 standing committees, **8 work under the Rajya Sabha and 16 under the Lok Sabha.**

- **Members:** Each standing committee consists of **31 members (21 from Lok Sabha and 10 from Rajya Sabha)**. The members of the Lok Sabha are **nominated by the Speaker**, just as the members of the Rajya Sabha are nominated by the Chairman from amongst its members
 - A **minister is not eligible to be nominated as a member of any of the standing committees**. In case a member, after his nomination to any of the standing committees, is appointed a minister, he then ceases to be a member of the committee
- **Tenure:** The term of office of each standing committee is **one year from the date of its constitution**.
- **Role:**
 - They secure more **accountability of the Executive** (i.e., the Council of Ministers) to the Parliament. Through Committees, Parliament exercises its control and influence over administration and keeps vigilance over the executive.
 - The Committees **aid and assist the Legislature in discharging its duties** and regulating its functions effectively, expeditiously and efficiently. They assist the Parliament in thoroughly and systematically scrutinising the matters which could not be discussed on the floor at length.
 - The Committees also provide the **expertise on a matter** which is referred to them.
- **New Draft Guidelines:** Recently, Rajya Sabha secretariat prepared **new draft guidelines for its standing committees**. The guidelines are still under review by the Lok Sabha Speaker. This may include:
 - A minimum 15 days' notice and confirmation by one-third of the members before holding a panel meeting.
 - Nomination of members based on their qualifications, interests and occupations.
 - At least 50% attendance while collecting evidence and adopting reports.

Parliamentary Committees

- The Constitution of India makes a mention of these committees at different places, but **without making any specific provisions regarding their composition, tenure, functions, etc.**
- Broadly, parliamentary committees are of two kinds—**Standing Committees and Ad Hoc Committees**.

- **Standing Committees : Permanent** (constituted every year or periodically) and **work on a continuous basis.** They can be categorized into following broad groups
 - **Financial Committees**
 - **Departmental Standing Committees (24)**
 - **Committees to Inquire**
 - **Committees to Scrutinise and Control**
 - **Committees Relating to the Day-to-Day Business of the House**
 - **House-Keeping Committees or Service Committees**
- **Ad Hoc Committees: Temporary** and cease to exist on completion of the task assigned.
 - Ad hoc committees can be divided into two categories, that is, Inquiry Committee and Advisory Committee.
 - Examples of Ad Hoc Committees: **Joint Committee on Bofors Contract, Joint Committee on Fertilizer Pricing etc.**

Way Forward

- The sittings of Parliament are **steadily declining over the years.** From 100-150 sittings in the 1950s, the number is down to 60-70 sittings per year in 2019-20. In such a scenario, a **major part of parliamentary work is done by DRSCs.** A longer tenure will help in completion of tasks and deliberations assigned to them.
- However, there is a need for a number of other **parliamentary reforms.** It has been seen that the majority of the bills were passed by the Parliament through a voice vote, without much debating and without referring them to the parliamentary committees. For example, **RTI Amendment Act (2019), UAPA Amendment Act (2019)** - which have huge implications on civil liberties, **were passed without referring them to the Parliamentary committee.**

Source: TH