

THE NEW CLASS

MEMBERS of the Lok Sabha could not have adjourned on a happier note. On Friday, they were given the good news that their daily allowance was being increased, with immediate effect, from Rs 31 to Rs 51: their perquisites will also be substantially increased as soon as a Bill introduced for this purpose on Friday becomes law, presumably in the next session. Yet, many on the Opposition benches protested against the decision, as did some in the Rajya Sabha (for the bounty has been bestowed on members of both Houses). Nevertheless, judging by past experience, it is very doubtful whether the critics will take up the sarcastic challenge by the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, Mr Raghuramiah, that those who do not like the increase in the daily allowance need not accept it.

It is axiomatic that a country should pay its law-makers reasonably well, as it should its engineers, surgeons, civil servants, teachers and others. Also, there is no doubt that prices have almost continuously increased, not only in this country; so have salaries, including those of Congressmen in the USA and MPs in Britain. But an essential difference between Members of Parliament and other salaried groups cannot be overlooked: MPs alone are in the happy position of being able to fix their own pay and perks. They are expected, therefore, to exercise, in the matter of wage demands, greater restraint than the low-paid Government employees and others are being asked to do from time to time. Friday's decision on MPs' pay and perquisites hardly conforms to this criterion.

The last time the MPs gave themselves a pay rise was in 1964 when their monthly salary was increased from Rs 400 to Rs 500 and their daily allowance from Rs 21 to Rs 31. To raise the allowance by as much as two-thirds in less than five years cannot but be considered excessive, especially when in no other sector have fixed incomes been increased at this rate. Furthermore, even before the latest increases, the MPs enjoyed generous perquisites including heavily subsidized housing, free rail travel all over the country, free telephone, free medical aid and the like. With the higher daily allowance and sweeping increases in perquisites, Members of Parliament in India are becoming what

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Mr Dhillas described as the New Class. It does seem odd that at a time when the rigours of the 'P' form are getting from bad to worse where the ordinary citizen is concerned, MPs will not only continue to enjoy the privilege of virtually free travel abroad once a year, but also get their foreign exchange allocation increased from Rs 6,000 to Rs 9,000.

The manner in which the daily allowance and perquisites have been hiked up does not add to the MPs' prestige or credit. The Joint Committee which started the ball rolling was appointed on the strict understanding that it would confine its recommendations to "facilities" and would say nothing about pay and allowance. Yet, the committee by a majority recommended a steep increase in the daily allowance. The Government began by saying that it would accept only those recommendations of the Committee which were unanimous; but pressure from the Congress Parliamentary Party stampeded the Cabinet into accepting even controversial majority recommendations. It is a measure of the lopsided thinking on the subject that the unanimous and perhaps the most sensible recommendation that MPs should be given adequate secretarial assistance has been brushed aside, while other facilities such as greater opportunity for air travel at nominal payment have been agreed to. What is the public to think of such state of affairs, especially in view of past complaints of misuse of existing privileges and facilities? Some MPs at least are known to have sublet their houses or unlawfully sold motor cars purchased on the strength of official priority. Comparisons between the pay and perks of MPs in India and those of legislators in affluent societies would be misleading. The question which MPs here must ask themselves is how do their increased emoluments and facilities compare with those of citizens whom they undoubtedly represent and even claim to serve.