A Few Good Men…

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The Acting president, Goodluck Jonathan, has given life to his cabinet. It is now their turn to give life to the country. It is an awesome responsibility and one hopes that they understand it as such, now that the hustling and hysteria over “juicy” portfolios are over. Jonathan’s speech is the best delivered in recent times. The message is right and the delivery too. The emphasis on service delivery to the Nigerian people is appropriate considering how much they have been ignored and taken for granted. The emphasis on performance is well placed because it serves to put the ministers on their toes. “No minister will be allowed to go on a mission of endless search for solution,” he said.

It was a carefully calibrated speech, a speech that looked better than the cabinet itself. A friend of mine described it as a cabinet of “a few good men and the others.” Cabinet composition in a country like Nigeria must be a very tasking job indeed. And I am not referring to the ethnic and religious complexities but rather to the other imponderables such as godfatherism, federal character-ism, juicy appointment-ism, the next election-ism and many other -isms that must be factored into the selection.

But Jonathan would have done better for the country by assigning portfolios to the nominations. The world has become more knowledge-specific. The generalist is yielding ground to the specialist. To pick a motley crowd and begin to scratch his head as he wonders where to fix them is far from what the country deserves. There are several drawbacks in the present arrangement. First, the confirming body, the Senate, is likely to grope for the right questions to ask, without knowing the portfolio. Secondly, the fellow who finds himself in a portfolio that is strange to him will think he is asked to take lessons in rocket science. He will probably spend a minimum of six months understanding the basic complexities of his assignment. Thirdly, the experts in that field will play ludo with him by deceiving him on the technical and esoteric aspects of the job since they know he has no sound grasp of the business.

Confirmation hearings are done in small committees in some other countries by experts in that field. That way, the nominee is fully stretched, his knowledge adequately measured and his temper fully tested. Some people have argued that since corruption is a way of life in Nigeria, it would be easier to bribe a small group than a large committee of the whole Senate. Maybe, maybe not, but the truth is that you can only seek to bribe people if you lack the expertise. If you have the expertise and the integrity, you can tell bribe seekers to go to hell and rot in it. And the people we need for such positions are people who have an abundance of both not idiotic boot licking hustlers who are ready to clean anybody’s shoes for the job.

In the recent confirmation hearing, we noticed that there was some rigorous questioning only on the first day. Even then most of the questions were more general than specific and served no useful purpose. You can only say that the Senate has improved slightly from the days when nominees were simply slapped with such loaves of bread as “Can you recite the pledge? can you sing the national anthem? what is the name of the Senate president?” But if portfolios had been attached, the senators would have been able to test the nominees’ grasp of the problems and solutions in their ministers.

The Senate is supposed to provide a level playing field for every nominee that appears before it. To tell anyone to bow and go without answering any question simply because he had once been a senator is discriminatory, unreasonable and roundly defeats the purpose of conducting a hearing. What makes an ex-senator more saintly than an ex-governor of a state or the CEO of a blue chip company or an ex-member of the House of Representatives or any other citizen for that matter? One expects that a body like the Senate should be the one that should seek to promote the basic concept of equality, equality of opportunities and general fairness rather than engage in this indefensive promotion of privilege, exclusivity and inequality based on a misguided, and skewed theory of espirit de corps.

Let me ask: If the senator - minister appears before the Senate to give an account of his stewardship, is he likely to be asked questions or he will always be asked to bow and go, in furtherance of this double standard? Can Mr Mark answer the question?