



RACE COURSE ROAD PRABHU CHAWLA

Manmohan's UPA Clueless, Comatose

The past two weeks in Parliament have been disastrous for both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the UPA Government he leads. The chaos in the House also exposed the internal weaknesses of the Congress Party in handling the business of governance. The politics of confrontation has led to a complete breakdown of dialogue between the ruling party and the Opposition. Moreover, it also exposed the truth that the recent Cabinet reshuffle hasn't made the Government more effective. The Congress was fighting a lonely battle, with its allies sitting on the fence and letting it suffer political humiliation. The Government failed to get even three of the 35 bills listed for Parliament's approval passed. The Prime Minister had to skip the session for a day after coming under relentless opposition fire. He was relying on the team of three Cabinet colleagues headed by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pawan Bansal, to ensure smooth sailing in the House. But not one of them could strike a deal with an unusually aggressive Bharatiya Janata Party, or strategically divide the opposition to rescue the Government from periodic embarrassment in both Houses of Parliament. Over 50 per cent of the total Parliament time was lost in boycott, filibustering and adjournments. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi's absence made life even more difficult for the Prime Minister and his trusted colleagues. While the young ministers were missing in action, the confrontationist approach of the senior ones made communication with the opposition difficult. The premier seemed clueless; for example, he

would spot a minister he believed could open informal talks, either with the BJP or non-saffron parties, to end the impasse, but he would hesitate to take the matter forward being unsure of the political implications of involving senior ministers like Sharad Pawar or Trinamool leaders. Finally, the hapless Manmohan turned to Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee as usual, to contact and plead with the BJP leadership and others to let the Government get some of its legislative business done. Pranab walked the whole mile, but he wasn't successful. Now, the trapped Prime Minister has initiated a search for a new set of troubleshooters who will save him from the troublesome Opposition in Parliament.

And the Babus are Infected Too

Troubles for the UPA Government never seem to end. Most of its ministers are unable to take decisions because senior civil servants are avoiding putting files up to their ministers. Even the agenda for Cabinet meetings is prepared at the last minute. There appears to be an informal agreement among top babus that they would only follow instructions and not take the initiative. Moreover, upright and efficient officers based in various states are unwilling to come to the Centre. All of them are particularly peeved over the inability of the political leadership to protect them from over-active and coercive investigative agencies and Comptroller and Auditor General of India reports. Earlier, CAG reports were filed away, after submitting an Action Taken Report. Now, adverse reports involving even minor procedural delays are referred to the CBI, or other agencies, for scrutiny and possible prosecution. Due to bureaucratic inaction, many infrastructural projects, important policy decisions and even proposals for foreign direct investment are not being processed. Babus are now passing the buck to the Empowered Group of Ministers with the message: take it or leave it.



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Can the PM Hold the Fort?

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will be the first non-Gandhi Prime Minister to address the nation for the eighth time from the ramparts of the Red Fort. Before him, Atal Bihari Vajpayee had the privilege of making six speeches. But the record is still held by Jawahar Lal Nehru and Indira Gandhi who made 17 and 16 speeches each, from the Red Fort. Both would speak extempore while Manmohan Singh still reads from written notes. And that has posed fresh problems. For the past two weeks, officials from the Prime Minister's Office have been seeking inputs from all the Union ministries to draft a speech that would restore Manmohan's credibility and re-establish his authority. Since his last speech on August 15, 2010, Manmohan has suffered a severe blow to his personal reputation, thanks to various scams. His last seven speeches dealt with predictable subjects

like agriculture, terrorism, infrastructure, North-East, Jammu and Kashmir and the usual flattering references to the Gandhis and a Nehru. The Prime Minister's unofficial think tank and aides have run out of ideas for a speech that would be an ideal mix of politics, economics, diplomacy and social issues, which will project Manmohan as a statesman and not just a UPA leader. This time around, he was advised to emphasise on his resolve to fight corruption and ensure a stable economy. The real challenge for PMO speechwriters, who are formulating the Prime Minister's speech, is how to erase negative perception with an emotional outpouring of purple prose, from the mind of an economist-turned-politician.

Union Cabinet Has MoS Hiccup

Some of the newly appointed Ministers of State (MoS) with independent charge are yet to understand the protocol involved in attending a Cabinet meeting. According to the rules, no MoS is expected to attend a meeting of the Cabinet, unless an item relating to his or her ministry is on the agenda. Once a decision on the item has been taken, the MoS has to leave the meeting so that other MoSs may join. But for the past two meetings, newly appointed MoS Jayanthi Natarajan forgot to follow the format due to sheer ignorance or forgetfulness. She had been an MoS earlier too, but without independent charge. Now, after becoming the MoS with independent charge of the important Ministry of Environment and Forests, Jayanthi has been landing up earlier than necessary for Cabinet meetings, even if no matters related to her ministry are listed on the agenda. It was left to Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, with a polite signal, to remind her about procedures regarding participating in a Cabinet meeting. Jayanthi would have been saved from the embarrassment if only the newly appointed Cabinet Secretary had given her a proper briefing.