

The Manmohan Reshuffle is Change India Can't Believe In



It is better to refrain from taking a decision if all it does is reflect the decision-maker's indecisive state of mind. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's belated decision to honour his promise to deliver an expansive Cabinet reshuffle turned out to be yet another exercise in futility. He was under no obligation or compulsion to change the look and composition of his largest-ever Council of Ministers. Yet he dropped seven and added eight. After the much hyped rejig, the average age of the UPA II Cabinet climbed from 60 to 65. The new-look Government is neither younger in the biological sense nor more promising in terms of delivery. Unfortunately, re-engineering the Union Cabinet is perceived

It was clear that a once-great economist-turned-politician-turned-prime minister, beaten down by scams, has decided to follow the beaten path.

For the past few weeks, establishment spin doctors have been hinting at a major overhaul to improve the prime minister's personal image. Subtle hints were dropped about inducting new blood that was raring to deliver on many fronts. Admittedly, the economy is in a terrible shape. Inflation has almost crossed double digits. Global confidence in the India Story is fast evaporating. Foreign Direct Investment has fallen by over 30 per cent: from \$27.3 billion in 2008 to just \$19.42 billion in 2011. Even the outflow of FDI from India is in sharp decline, which means Indian industrial barons dare

50 Group of Ministers appointed by the prime minister to resolve vague issues, it is the finance ministry that ultimately suffers. If Mukherjee is sent to deal with troublesome UPA allies, hostile opposition parties and truculent civil society leaders, obviously he will not have the time or energy to mentor India's economic administration. No wonder, the government now doles out Rs 8,000 crore per day as interest on the money it has borrowed from the people. Government expenditure has risen from Rs 5 lakh crore in 2004 to over Rs 1,250 crore during the current fiscal year. If the prime minister and the Congress President are unable to handle political problems, Mukherjee should've been drafted as the Working President or Vice President of the Congress, and a full-

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as the best road map for better governance. In practice, this has hardly ever worked. Most Cabinet expansions or contractions in the past have been motivated more by political expediency and less by the performance of individuals. Do the prime minister and the Congress party really believe that dropping ministers like Murli Deora, Manohar Singh Gill, B K Handique and Dayanidhi Maran will make the government smell like roses? Or by moving Salman Khurshid from water resources to law and Jairam Ramesh from environment to rural development, the Cabinet will look lily white? If such is the case, they have grossly underestimated the scrutiny skills of the Indian electorate. From the nature of changes made in the Cabinet, it appears that the dropped ministers are responsible for the plummeting credibility of the Government and a collapsing economy. It wasn't even a game of musical chairs as it lacked the consistency of musical notes. Of the 32 Cabinet ministers, only two were shuffled. No minister handling infrastructure or the economy was moved. Did Manmohan Singh chose to retain S M Krishna—whose performance as foreign minister is pathetic—bowing to his decency, age, Savile Row tailoring and an Oxbridge accent?

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not continue their global acquisition spree. According to figures released by the government, the index of industrial production plunged to a mere 5.6 per cent in May this year, as against 8.5 per cent during the same month last year. Even the growth of car sales was restricted to 1.62 per cent last month—the lowest ever during the past 27 months. No infrastructure sector is doing well. For example, the construction of national highways today has declined to less than 6 km per day as against 11 km in 2004 during the NDA regime. The petroleum sector has failed to live up to expectations. Finally, the number of people living below the poverty line has risen despite the nation growing at an average of over 8 per cent.

The UPA Government's pathetic image is not due to the bad performance of those who have been shown the door, it is entirely due to policy paralysis and aimless political drift. When Pranab Mukherjee, the government's most productive asset, is diverted to handle over

time economist like Montek Singh Ahluwalia should've been appointed the finance minister. HRD Minister Kapil Sibal was doing an outstanding job by pushing badly-needed education reforms. For the past five months, he has been saddled with fire-fighting on the government's behalf, leaving the education ministry at the mercy of babus—and both his ministries are suffering. Even Home Minister P Chidambaram is not comfortable at home. Though, he has done a commendable job, Chidambaram would, perhaps, make a better defence minister or external affairs minister. No doubt, the prime minister has chosen new faces, clear of any taint or political infirmity, but none of these can reverse the economic downturn or save the Government from daily judicial scrutiny. With no big message emerging from the Cabinet readjustment, it is clear that the prime minister lacks the will to shed the Non-Productive Assets (NPAs) of the UPA government.

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