



RACE COURSE ROAD PRABHU CHAWLA

PM Passing the Buck to Pranab Far too Often

Is it a distaste for confrontation, or simply lack of time? The suspension of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's practice of reviewing the functions of various ministries has come back to bite him. The soul searching going on in South Block on how UPA II has been caught in a quagmire of controversy has concluded that, had Singh continued his periodic review of the ministries, the 2G and other scams could have been averted. With the boss out of the way, all Central ministers and their secretaries have been enjoying full freedom, exercising total control over the decision-making process. Rajiv

Gandhi started the practice of reviewing the performance of ministries; every quarter, he and his aides in the PMO would grill Cabinet colleagues on their targets and failures. This was continued till the fag end of the UPA I. Since Manmohan Singh believes in giving total autonomy to his ministers, no decisions were taken by some ministers while others indulged in malpractices.

For example, during UPA I, the Prime Minister chaired a

high-powered Committee on Infrastructure which used to meet quite frequently to review various projects. But it has either become dormant or doesn't exist at all. It is not surprising that most infrastructure projects are either languishing, or are trapped in corruption. In addition, the Prime Minister has evolved another mechanism of self defence—that of passing the buck to his senior colleague Pranab Mukherjee. Most of the complex decisions which are usually taken by the concerned minister in consultation with the Prime Minister, are now Mukherjee's responsibility; he currently chairs the Empowered Group of Ministers which has more than 50 members. As the countdown for the next elections begins, the Prime Minister is under pressure to restore a credible system of accountability rather than let the buck move from one table to another.

Democracy of the Unelected

There was a time when it was considered the worst kind of sin to appoint a Prime Minister or a Chief Minister who wasn't chosen by the people. Not anymore; leading a government without winning an election has become a virtue. Recently, Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan joined this elite club, by getting himself elected to the Legislative Council in his state. The six-month period that mandates a chief minister has to become a member of either House of the state Legislature is to expire on May 6. Instead of getting an assembly seat vacated, Chavan forced a member of the Legislative Council to resign, in order to avoid the heat and dust of contesting an election. Chavan is now the third chief minister after Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh and Nitish Kumar in Bihar to hold office through such means. The practice of appointing a non-elected leader became popular after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh avoided contesting the Lok Sabha polls, although he could have won from any part of the country. No wonder those who secure the mandate of the people don't respect their leaders, only fear them.

War on Graft Has a Past Tense

While the investigations into the 2G and CWG scams are yet to be completed, various government agencies have started to investigate other deals involving the

Ministries of Civil Aviation and Surface Transport. The new ministers don't want to be caught napping and they have instructed their officers to put on record all pending complaints regarding contracts awarded to various contractors for further scrutiny. Because of the fake pilots scandal, the Ministry of Civil Aviation

is under intense scrutiny. But the ministry and its other wings are looking at other tainted deals. Vayalar Ravi, Union Minister for Civil Aviation, a former trade union leader who is highly trusted by the Congress High Command is under instructions to change the elitist character of the civil aviation sector and break the nexus between a few corporate honchos and the babus. He is particularly looking at the role of some babus who first facilitated various sweetheart deals and later joined private aviation companies. However, some in the government feel the whole exercise is meant to put the heat on former aviation minister Praful Patel. Similarly, new Surface Transport Minister C P Joshi is looking at all the old contracts granted by his predecessor Kamal Nath, including some of the lucrative Express Highways contracts that ministry officials feel have led to a huge loss of revenue to the National Highways Authority of India.

The Great Diplomatic Carnival

Not only will the face of the top bureaucracy in Delhi change this summer, but India will have new diplomats in place, in many crucial capitals of the world. While Prime Minister Manmohan Singh continues to seek suitable replacement for India's ambassador to Washington, Meera Shankar, who retires in July, he has chosen new envoys to important nations like Thailand, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Poland. While Hamid Ali Rao goes to Saudi Arabia, the PMO has chosen Anil Wadhwa for Bangkok, Gurjeet Singh for Indonesia and Monika Mota for Poland. Since disarmament is likely to become an important issue, Sujatha Mehta, currently serving in the Prime Minister's Office, goes off to Geneva to represent India. These changes are a precursor to many crucial top-level changes in South Block which will follow only after a Cabinet reshuffle by the end of May.