



RACE COURSE ROAD PRABHU CHAWLA

Garibi Hatao Clouds Gather Before Reshuffle

While Congress leaders are busy with the elections, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi are busy reading up dossiers on those likely to be promoted or be inducted as new ministers in the Cabinet reshuffle next month. Worried partymen have made it clear to both Sonia and Rahul that the Family must intervene to revive the party's fortunes by refashioning the face of the government. None favour a change of Prime Minister yet, but all those seeking an ideological shift in the look and feel of the government are firm that the coterie around the Singh be dismantled—those loyal to the party ideology should be made part of the new Cabinet instead of the ones who seek endorsement from America or India Inc. After the scams, UPA II is perceived as a pro-business government. Congressmen say the reason why they lost the 1996 elections—Manmohan was the Finance Minister then—was that the party was seen as pro-rich. Hence, the new mantra is that the Congress should be projected as a political party that approaches “the Centre from the left, and not from the right,” and that the Cabinet should have a socialist face. Only the reshuffle will tell if Manmohan will revert to his pre-1991 left-of-centre avatar.

All The PM's Corporate Cassandras

Is an insecure government dimming the India story? This was the fear of the nattily attired group of more than 20 business and banking honchos who met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at his residence last week for the first-ever meeting meant to lay out a roadmap for inclusive growth. For Manmohan, it was an opportunity to engage the corporate world in bringing his economic agenda back on the table. The power list of India Inc.—Ratan Tata, Jamshed Godrej, Rahul Bajaj, Pawan Munjal, Azim Premji, Sunil Mittal, Deepak Parekh, Ashok

Ganguly, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw and Chanda Kochar—patiently heard each other out. Some even made PowerPoint presentations. All used the opportunity to obliquely inform the PM that the current environment of fear and favour has put them all under pressure and is inhibiting their potential.

The irrepressible Rahul Bajaj said an impression that the country was slipping back into the pre-1991 controlled economy was gaining ground. Young Kumar Mangalam Birla read out a well-written intervention on India being hamstrung by economic inaction on reforms. Both banker Deepak Parekh and telecom czar Sunil Mittal spoke about the disastrous impact of indecision on FDI policy on retail and how the suspense over the new telecom policy after the 2G scam is detrimental to the sector. Parekh said he has discovered that India isn't popular with investors any more. The message to Manmohan was clear—punish the criminals but don't penalise the clean. For Manmohan—once India Inc's darling—it was a shocker coming from members of his own Council on Industry and Trade.

CVC Haunted By Thomas Effect

After the P. J. Thomas fiasco, the government is in no hurry to appoint a new Chief Vigilance Commissioner (CVC). For the first time since 1964, India has been without a CVC. It's been six weeks already, and the selection process for a new CVC hasn't even started. With Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Home Minister P Chidambaram—on the election trail, South Block mandarins are waiting for instructions, leaving the two Vigilance Commissioners, R Sri Kumar and J. M. Garg, to hold fort. Even the secretary to the CVC, K S Ramasubban, has retired. With Minister of State for Personnel V Narayanswamy in Puducherry for elections, the Department of Personnel & Training (DoPT) is sitting on all files. The real reason behind the delay, however, may be the government's confusion over implementing a Supreme Court ruling, making it mandatory for candidates from outside the All India Services to be considered for the CVC's post—so far the position has been an IAS bastion. Usually, a top babu is given the plum post in recognition of services rendered to the ruling party, both in the states and at the Centre. The bureaucracy, insecure at the thought of an outsider monitoring their conduct, is strongly opposed to the court's ruling. The political leadership has fallen in line with the IAS. Insiders say the PMO is agreeable to letting the DoPT invite suggestions and applications and shortlist suitable candidates to be interviewed by the three-member panel headed by Prime Minister with the Home Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha as members. The final word is not out, but the nation may get its first woman CVC.

Chidambaram's Certificate Course

It was a choice Hobson could've dreamt up: excessive security or incredible India? Recently, the Home Minister P. Chidambaram gracefully accepted that attracting tourists is as important as securing India. Succumbing to mounting pressure from the newly appointed Tourism Minister Subodh Kant Sahai, the Home Ministry unobtrusively withdrew its earlier communications to Indians missions abroad which made it mandatory for all seeking a visa to submit birth certificates. The ministry issued this order in the wake of the David Coleman Headley revelations. The communique had drawn flak from Indians who

are foreign citizens but who didn't possess a birth certificate. Many US citizens found it a bothersome procedure. Finally Chidambaram yielded, but not before instructing Indian missions to ensure proper verification is done before granting a visa.



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