



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THE winter session of Parliament has been on for nearly a fortnight now and the only time MPs behaved like honorable members was when US President Barack Obama addressed them. With both houses deadlocked for more than a week over Opposition demands for a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) to probe the telecom scam and the government's reluctance to oblige, speculation swirled at week's end about both houses being adjourned *sine die*. If that happens today, it would be the first time ever that an entire session will pass by without any business being conducted.

For Manmohan Singh, this has been the worst week in over six years as PM and a friend in the Congress admits the prime minister is beginning to feel a sense of insecurity. He referred to Singh's uncharacteristically offensive remark during his joint press conference with Obama at Hyderabad House on the sensitive subject of outsourcing when he said that "we Indians" were "not in the business of stealing jobs". True, but if Manmohan had nothing to hide, the least the nation expects of him is to be equally forthright and come out and say his ministers are not in the business of stealing the nation's wealth. "Instead what we have from the prime minister is the sound of silence," my friend said.



S. Swamy

In the cabinet form of government, the prime minister is the first among equals. Manmohan Singh's unimpeachable honesty and integrity were supposed to reflect the strength and stability of the UPA government. But what we are seeing is the highest court in the land raising questions about the manner in which the PMO went about taking decisions. If such a legal rap is unheard of, even more surprising is the silence of the more than 200 Congress MPs who were expected to back him when the entire opposition was baying for his blood. Where were they?

When the opposition cleverly targeted Manmohan instead of the usual suspects in the ruling combine, the Congress was caught off guard. For a full two days, the opposition held forth in parliament and in TV studios. There is no shortage of legal luminaries in the government, but initially none of them were to be seen. Instead Dr Subramanian Swamy did what he loves doing — hog the limelight. That one man army held news conferences on the Supreme Court lawns and was readily answering journalists calls.

There was nobody from the Congress either at the Supreme Court, Akbar Road or at Parliament House to defend the prime minister. It wasn't until after three days that the Congress began to get its act together. As Parliament remained paralysed

for the sixth day, first Rahul Gandhi and then telecom minister Kapil Sibal launched the most powerful defence. "I don't think he is in an embarrassing position at all," Rahul Gandhi snapped back when asked to comment on the PM's situation after the Supreme Court's harsh comments. Insiders say Sibal spoke out only after the Prime Minister bitterly remarked in the Congress core group meeting at his residence on Thursday that he did not get support from legal luminaries such as Sibal and P. Chidambaram.

The confusion in the government was such that the law ministry's decision to ask attorney

general of India G.E. Vahanvati to represent the Prime Minister in the Supreme Court attracted flak. If they had guided the government's legal officers down the right path, the government would not have looked so silly, goes the argument.

To say that Parliament meets this week with the government in disarray is an understatement. The Opposition has already tasted blood, having forced the government in the last session to buckle on Bills such as enemy property amendments, prevention of torture Bill and the education tribunals law. They are determined to make the government buckle again and concede

to their demand for a JPC. It suits the Opposition fine since the JPC gives them the power to seek documents and extract information which the government may otherwise be reluctant to show. The daily closed door sittings of the JPC will surely be followed by selective leaks that will have the government squirming or running for cover. There have been only two JPCs in our Parliamentary history. The first was on Bofors, the second on the Harshad Mehta scam. Both were set up during Congress regimes. Both times, the Congress lost in the elections that followed. It is easy to see why the government dreads another JPC.



HIGH AND DRY

BJP top brass needs to give CMs their due

IF proof was needed of the huge disconnect between the BJP's Ashoka Road-centric central leadership and its band of popular chief ministers, it was available in plenty at the annual India Today "State of the States" conclave in the Capital last Friday. I caught up with Narendra Modi, P.K. Dhumal, Raman Singh, Arjun Munda, Uttarakhand's Ramesh Pokhriyal and Bihar's deputy chief minister Sushil Modi at the conclave.

Together they picked up awards in 12 categories with Himachal Pradesh emerging as the best performing state in India and even Bihar picking up two trophies for showing significant improvement in governance and healthcare. While interacting with them, it appeared to me they were dismayed at the party high command's lack of interest in projecting their achievements. In fact one of them told me that if the Congress had won so many awards, the party leadership would have milked it for all it was worth.

I recall that after Punjab won the award for the best state two years ago, the Badal government took full page advertisements in the state's dailies showing the father-son duo receiving the award. Last year, the Kerala home minister Kodayeri Balakrishnan picked up an award and by the time he reached Trivandrum the next day, his office had already arranged an airport press conference where he flaunted the trophy.

But the BJP leadership is behaving in a manner as if these chief ministers are not relevant. All of them are already seething for being kept out of the Bihar campaign. It is easy to now see why the party lost two consecutive elections at the national level but successfully retained the states where the party held power. From their tone and tenor, it appeared to me that the chief ministers, all of them who carry reputations of being doers, will not allow themselves to be dictated to for long by self-styled leaders who choose to operate from behind closed doors.

THERE is a widespread impression that governors are mere tools in the hands of the centre whose only job, apart from the many ceremonies, is to report back to Delhi about the activities of unfriendly state governments. S.S. Barnala, the occupant of the Chennai Raj Bhavan is of a different mould.

In 1991, the Congress sacked him after he refused to dismiss the then Karunanidhi government. When the DMK returned to power in 2004 in Chennai in alliance with the Congress, among Karunanidhi's early demands was for the return of Barnala as governor. While the DMK has an excellent rapport with Barnala, the Congress doesn't. With assembly elections coming up next year, the party has to look for alternative channels, apart from the usual intelligence and bureaucratic feedback, to devise its strategy for 2011.

After Jayalalitha pledged the support of her nine MP's conditional to the Congress jettisoning the DMK, the centre has activated

Raj Bhavan caught in Tamil Nadu power games

channels with at least four former and serving governors of Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states to get a feel of the way the wind is blowing. For the Congress, Tamil Nadu is crucial. Jaya's pledge of support accounts for only half the DMK's 18 MPs.

Besides, there is a consensus in the high command that the iron lady of Poes Garden is not a dependable ally, something that even the

S.S. Barnala

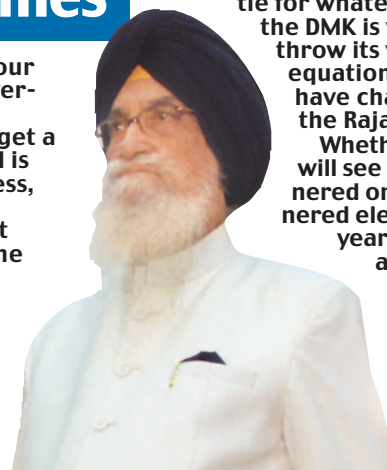
Opposition BJP will readily testify.

With age on his side, Rahul Gandhi is looking at the long term and wants the Congress to go it alone next year with an eye on reviving the party for the future. But the Congress old guard is in no mood to look beyond the coming elections and is willing to settle for whatever crumbs

the DMK is willing to throw its way. The equations, however, have changed after the Raja ouster.

Whether the state will see a two-cornered or multi-cornered election next year will depend to

a large extent on the feedback that Akbar Road gets from its secret band of governors and ex-governors.



THE best laid plans of men and mice often go awry. When M.K. Alagiri and his brother M.K. Stalin called on prime minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi nearly a month ago to invite them to the wedding of the former's son in Madurai, the Congress-DMK relations were on a roll. It was assumed the two would attend the power wedding. But on wedding day last week, the two were missing. But guess who landed up? Pranabda of course. With the government caught in a pincer over the Raja scam, the big two couldn't make it, but lest the DMK read wrong signals, Sonia requested Pranabda to attend the wedding.

Dada arrived for the wedding dressed in the typical Bengali silk kurta and dhoti. Apparently, the groom's grandfather M. Karunanidhi was thrilled to bits on seeing Pranabda and even tried to get up from his wheel chair to receive him.

In the DMK scheme of things, even a wedding is an occasion to make a political statement. Once the nuptials were done with, there was a clamour from DMK MPs that Pranabda make a brief speech. While everyone expected dada to bless and wish the couple, he sprang a surprise by saying that the Congress-DMK alliance had overcome many hurdles in the past and would continue to do so in future too. There were loud cheers but something tells me that Jayalalitha still won't give up.