

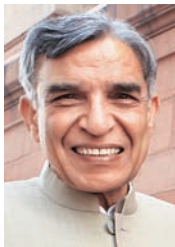
# POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

**T**ODAY, senior Union ministers are to meet with the leaders of the opposition parties to sort out differences over the contentious Women's Reservation Bill. Over the last weekend, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that his government was ready to sit with the opposition parties to resolve differences over the nuclear liability Bill. Taken together, these convey one message: the UPA government has finally realised that it needs to get off the high horse before it falls off it. Eleven months ago, UPA II came back to power.

Technically, it wasn't voted back to office. The coalition leader, the Congress, has just over 200 seats in the 544 member Lok Sabha and even with all its alliance partners, UPA II falls short of a simple majority and has to depend on the support from outside of parties like the Samajwadi Party, Lalu Yadav's RJD and Mayawati's BSP for survival.

Yet, senior ministers and officials known to be close to the establishment strutted around the corridors of power and Parliament with an arrogance that belied this fragility. When opposition leaders sought to highlight genuine concerns about important legislation, the government, far from showing regard, displayed a determination to steamroll all opponents.



P.K. Bansal

On the women's reservation Bill for example, it roped in the support of the opposition BJP and the Communists to bulldoze "friendly foes" like the SP and the RJD.

The chickens may finally be coming home to roost. With a host of important legislation awaiting passage in the two houses of Parliament, the government now realises that it cannot afford to brazen it out any longer. Recently, members of the "core group" in the government met to review the proceedings of Parliament during the brief but disastrous Budget session. There is silent acknowledgement that a woeful lack of floor coordination has brought the government to this pass. Nothing illustrates this better than the confusion in the run-up to the introduction of the Nuclear Liability Bill which was to be piloted in the Lok Sabha a fortnight ago.

The Bill formed part of the list of business in the Lok Sabha, but shortly before it was to be introduced, Speaker Meira Kumar informed the house that she had received a request from the government that it does not intend to introduce the Bill in the house as slated. This was something unprecedented in Indian Parliamentary history. The core group that consists of Pranab Mukherjee, AK Antony, P Chidambaram and Veerappa Moily was joined by Parliamentary Affairs Minister PK Bansal, as is the custom, when matters relating to Parliament and its proceedings are discussed. Bansal's earnestness is beyond question but the same cannot be said about his capability or efficiency.

I suspect the government wished it had the likes of Priya Ranjan Das Munshi and Vayalar Ravi or even Pramod Mahajan or Sushma Swaraj who used their cross party connections to win bipartisan support to push through crucial legislation. Neither Bansal nor V Narayanaswamy, the affable junior minister for parliamentary affairs, seem up to their admittedly difficult assignments.

Many more important and contentious legislation are due to come up in the next few months. Apart from the nuclear liability and women's reservation bills, there are the Pensions Funds Regulatory Bill, the Foreign Universities Bill and the Communal Violence Bill, to name just a few.

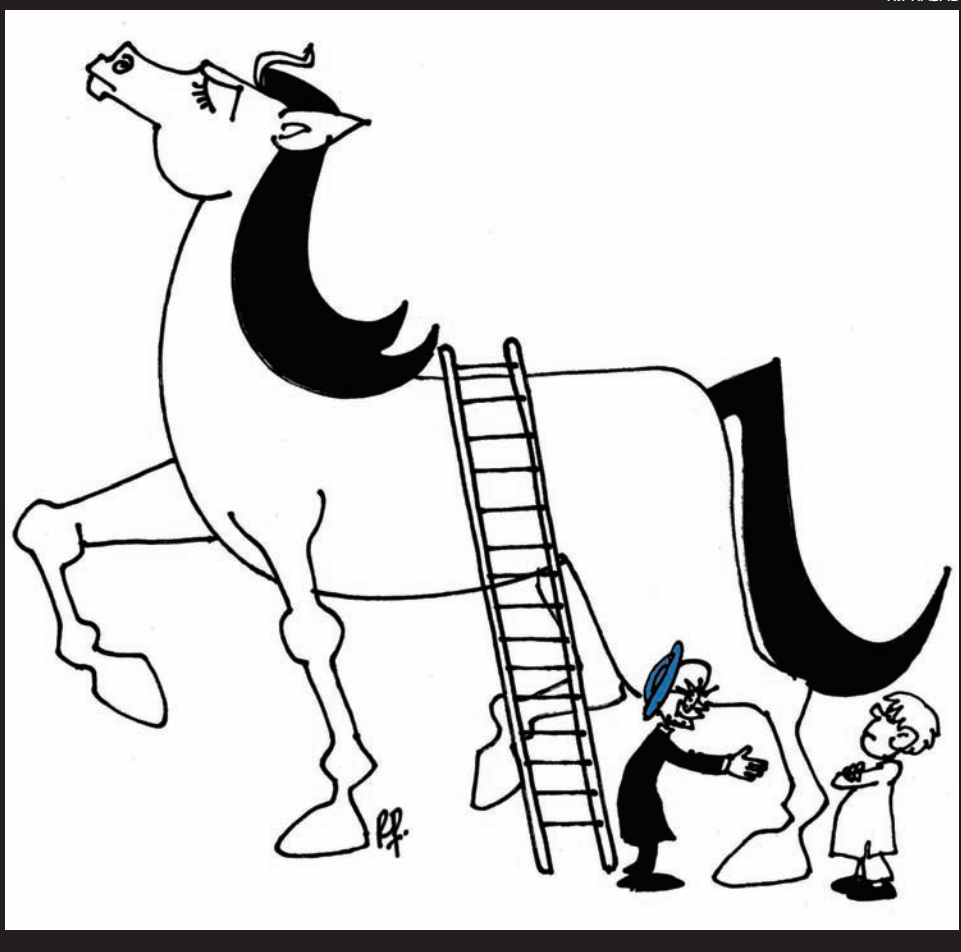
In all these, the dividing line between supporter and opponent is blurred and the government will have to walk the tightrope to ensure that allies are not annoyed and opponents are won over. There are no permanent friends or enemies in politics. It is all the more important to keep this truism in mind in the coming months when the Congress and its allies set out to face elections in important states like Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Whether the Congress faces the polls in alliance with the DMK and the Trinamool Congress would depend to a large extent on how the party manages these allies in Parliament.

I understand that the core group, or the "awesome foursome" as they are known, have

in a reversal of recent policy decided to abandon the confrontationist model that has characterised the Congress in the first year of UPA II and adopt a consensual approach. Many of the prime minister's big ticket reforms will come up for parliamentary scrutiny in the next few months. The Congress will need all the help it can hope to garner. Already, HRD minister Kapil Sibal has spoken to Murlu Manohar Joshi and I see many more hatchets being buried. I predict that UPA II will bend over backwards to win the support of even ideological opponents as long as they have a national perspective, which many of the Congress's own allies don't.

## Goodbye to arrogance

R.PRASAD



## Governance agenda back on track

**SO, AFTER a long gap of four years, the National Advisory Council is back with Sonia Gandhi once again heading it as the Chairperson. When set up shortly after the UPA had come to power in May 2004, it was often criticised as being a parallel power centre as Sonia enjoyed the rank of a cabinet minister and the NAC was given unrestricted access to all government documents, including cabinet files.**

**The NAC attracted further attention when, in 2006, Sonia got embroiled in the office of profit controversy and quit as its chief as well as a Lok Sabha member. She easily won reelection to Parliament but she did not return to the NAC which remained a defunct body. Even its website hosted by the National Informatics Centre simply said, "This site is temporarily unavailable".**

**I am not surprised at the sudden decision to revive the NAC. The feathers in the crown of the UPA—the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Rural Health Mission and the Right to Information Act, among others—were thanks in large measure to the vital role that the Council played in pushing these through in the UPA's early years.**

**Since then, there is widespread feeling that the government has lost its way, particularly on the UPA's social agenda where implementing policies and programmes that ensure delivery to the aam aadmi is first priority. Sonia is busy picking the members for the newly resurrected council which once constituted will meet once every month as in the past.**

**I believe that just as the government has decided to go in for a broad political consensus on programmes and legislation concerning national interest, the NAC under Sonia will interface with the civil leadership and provide feedback to the government to ensure that good governance is back on track. For first signs of that, I will keep checking the NAC website to see if it springs back to life.**

**MANMOHAN Singh is known as a prime minister who gives his ministers a free hand in running their departments. What is less known however is Manmohan's habit of keeping a close watch on the departments, in particular, the financial health of units under the public sector. This was evident once again last week on the occasion of the inauguration of 47th National Maritime Week when Manmohan had a quiet tete-a-tete with the Minister of Shipping Shri G.K. Vasan where I understand he was busy quizzing the minister on matters like turnover and profits at our ports.**

**Normally, these are the kind of functions where the prime minister, or any other dignitary, pretends to be a**



## Ministers learn that PM runs a tight ship indeed

**keen listener but is actually very bored and can't wait for it to be over. But Manmohan was different. What caught his attention was the theme for this year's Maritime Week celebrations: "Sea Faring: A Career of Opportunities".**

**Apparently, one of the speakers noted that there are about 50,000 ships sailing around the world at**

**any point of time and the demand for new crew was estimated to be around 2 lakh sailors in the next five years alone. According to sources who attended the meeting, that's when Manmohan smelt opportunity.**

**Remember, he is the man who unleashed the liberalisation process that now enables Indians and Indian companies to compete with the best anywhere in the world. He was all ears as the Shipping Secretary K Mohandas explained in detail about the immense potential in the sector and later as the Chairman of the Shipping Corporation of India gave a detailed account of the PSU. Don't be surprised if the prime minister now keeps a close watch on the maritime sector. As long as there are jobs waiting to be filled and profits to be made, he believes Indians will be up there challenging the finest in the world for every job and every dollar.**

**FOR months now, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of External Affairs, the National Security Council Secretariat, Home Ministry and many other ministries and departments have been on guard against cyber attacks originating in China aimed at destabilising the establishment. Now here is something to prove the existence of the menace within. Last week, the government issued a curious circular. It was curious because the government went to great lengths to clarify that it had not revised rates of overtime allowance for central government employees. The circular issued by the Ministry of Personnel said: "It has been confirmed from the ministry of finance that OM NO 1(4) 2010 E-II dated 27/3/2010 signed by M Rajan Chandranaydu, Under Secretary to the Government of India, purportedly issued by the Ministry of Finance is a fake. It is clarified that no such instruction has been issued by this Department or Ministry of Finance. Ministries/Departments are advised not to take cognisance of the fake instructions being circulated in Central Government Offices".**

**It remains a mystery how such a fake order was issued on the letterhead of an Officer of the rank of deputy secretary and even more, how it came to be pasted on the walls of central government offices across the capital. An inquiry has now been ordered and it is hoped that the culprit, possibly someone at the lower level, will soon be caught. But pity the poor babus who went on a splurge in anticipation of a largesse.**