

Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

THE BUDGET session of Parliament starts today. All eyes will be on Finance minister Pranab Mukherjee when he presents the Union budget on Friday and corporate India as well as the *aam aadmi* are eagerly looking forward to it. But our honourable MPs have other worries on their minds, particularly those belonging to the Rajya Sabha. This is because of a get-tough plan unveiled by Hamid Ansari, the Vice President and Chairman of the Upper House to crack down on truant ministers and MPs who are in the habit of taking their parliamentary responsibilities lightly.

Ansari has decided to hammer such truant elected representatives with a slew of measures and if these succeed — I don't see why they shouldn't — we will be spared the many shameful occasions in recent times when Parliament sessions had to be abandoned because too many MPs or ministers were absent.

The Vice President's initiatives couldn't have been more timely. Delinquency among MPs and ministers is rising by the day and last December, the Lok Sabha stood disgraced when on two occasions, Question Hour was suspended due to lack of quorum as many MPs whose questions were listed in the day's business remained absent. Until the mid-1980s, this sort of thing was a rarity, but now it's happening with unfailing regularity. Consider these: of late, both houses are half empty when the day's proceedings begin at 11 am with the traditional Question Hour. Even when they do turn up, it is often to hurl abuses or even wrestle with each other. MPs are lucky in that they don't have to report for work until 11 am. In many states, assemblies convene at 8.30 am. One recent study showed that while the first three Lok Sabhas met for an average of 124 days a year, now it is less than 80. Things are so bad that Sonia Gandhi sent missives to her party men and the BJP leadership issued diktats to its MPs to get serious. But these didn't work and I am not surprised, because in the current coalition scenario, I cannot see, for example, the DMK supremo M. Karunanidhi's son M.K. Alagiri, a Union minister, taking commands from anyone except his father.

Some ministers and MPs may be plain lazy. But the more likely reason why many of them stay away is because it suits both sides: the former won't have to answer embarrassing questions; the latter won't have to sit up late nights doing homework for the next day's session. And to think that for every minute that each house of Parliament sits, it may cost the exchequer a month's salary of an MP. It's easy to see why there is a near collapse of trust in politicians.

Vice President Ansari is not a career politician; he is a distin-

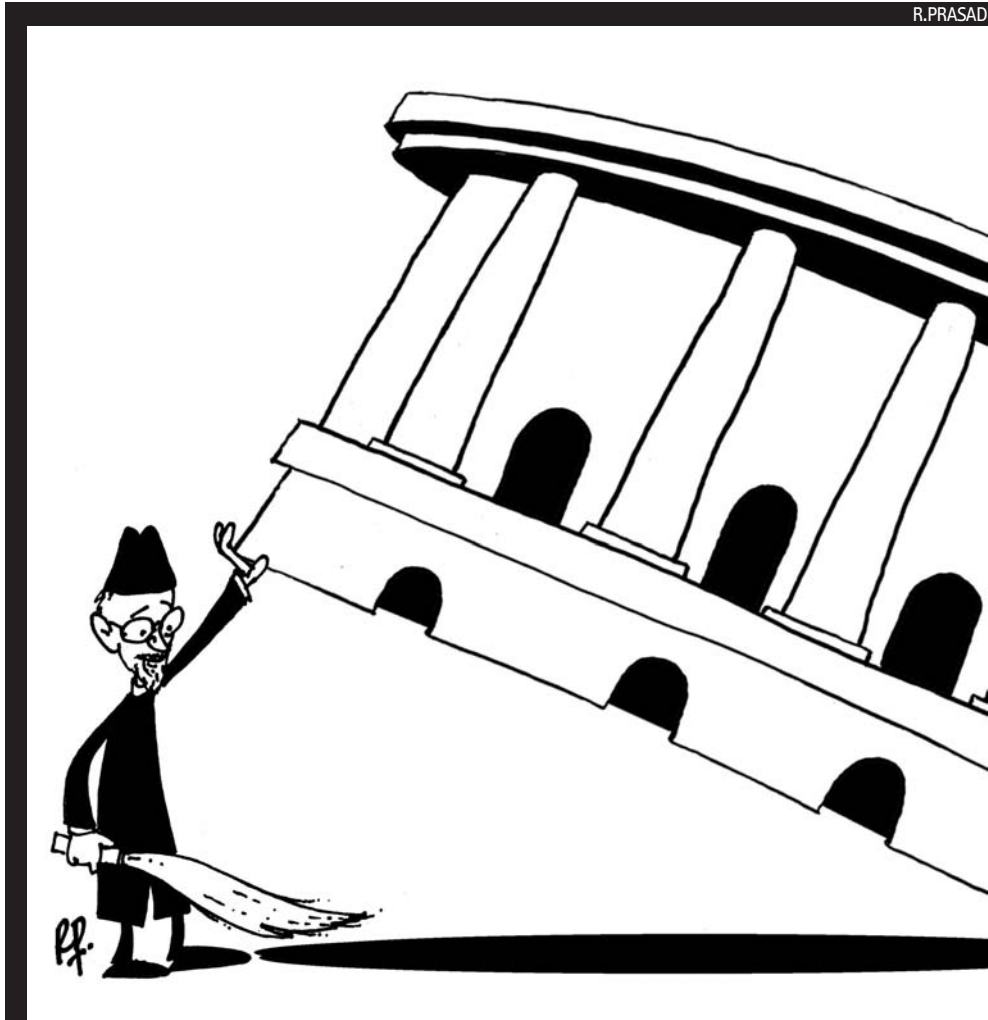
guished retired diplomat and an academician and it comes as no surprise that someone like him has decided to crack down on delinquency. He has made sweeping changes in the Rules of Procedure in the Rajya Sabha aimed at making ministers and MPs accountable. The new rules come into effect from today and will ensure that ministers do not escape answering questions even if the MPs who posed them are not present in the House. Until now, if the MP who asked a "starred question" — where the concerned minister has to give an oral answer as against the "unstarred" ones where written

answers are merely placed in the house — is absent, the question lapsed. Starting today, irrespective of whether the questioner is present in the House or not, the minister will have to give the information sought.

What's more, other MPs who may want clarifications will now have the right to grill the minister on the subject. Ansari has sent letters to all members of the Upper House about the new rules and it is hoped that our MPs take it as a reminder that they have been elected to serve and they serve best when they attend Parliament. I see no reason why Meira Kumar shouldn't

be encouraged to usher in similar changes in the Lok Sabha. Our MPs will then become more responsible and our claims of being a vibrant democracy will sound a lot more credible.

P.S. Too many businessmen have "managed" their way into the Rajya Sabha, whose membership entitles them to diplomatic passports. These are being used increasingly for business purposes and the foreign ministry has now issued a circular warning against such misuse. Like truant MPs, businessmen know their rights but it seems they too have to be reminded of their responsibilities.



Veep's point of order

Second thought on Pak talks?

AS IN business, so in diplomacy, targets are set, but some being unrealistic, they are doomed from the start or aborted before takeoff. The foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan scheduled this Thursday fall in this category. The overwhelming majority in the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) thought that the environment wasn't conducive for talks and was against its resumption.

They finally bowed to the PMO's wisdom. The government first said the talks would be open-ended but after the attack in Pune, the nuances are shifting. Foreign minister S.M. Krishna now says the talks will be exploratory in nature, which is like saying "Okay we'll meet, but we will

It looks like a pointless exercise

only talk about talking". Home minister Chidambaram says all pending issues related to 26/11 will be taken up by foreign secretary Nirupama Rao when she meets her Pakistani counterpart in New Delhi on Thursday. Defence minister A.K. Antony feels there is "nothing wrong" in talking but adds that Pakistani terrorist camps are "still active". The Army Chief accuses Pakistan of sending militants across into Kashmir.

Across the border, Pak ministers who were, just a fortnight ago, gloating over making New Delhi "blink first" are now accusing India of putting fresh hurdles in the way of talks. They may be right. For it appears to me that New Delhi would now do anything to wriggle out of the talks. It's a lose-lose situation for the government. If the talks fail it will lose face. If they are cancelled at the last minute, the government will have to answer the question: why were they announced at all? Parliament is in session and I can wage a bet that over at 11 Ashoka Road, the knives are being sharpened. Once again, the dialogue may be the victim.

SINCE taking over as the BJP president nearly six weeks ago, Nitin Gadkari has done much plain-speaking to antagonise some of its well-entrenched sections and said and done a lot to re-energise the party. With his deep roots in the RSS, there is general acknowledgement that there is none better qualified than him to lead the BJP, but among his current priorities is one that is very un-RSS like. Gadkari is on the lookout for a spin doctor to head the BJP media cell, which, according to him, should be handled by professionals as opposed to the army of amateur spin doctors who have so far managed to terribly harm its relations with the press.

Gadkari is looking for a person



Gadkari on lookout for a spinmeister

with connections and not necessarily convictions. His eyes fell on someone whom even his political opponents grudgingly acknowledge is the King of Spin. He has been a speechwriter to a former Prime Minister as also to a former deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister in-waiting. Unfortunately for Gadkari, he is so much in demand these days that even a king's ransom may not suffice for acquiring his services. Apart from being advisor to a high profile tantrum-prone Union minister from

West Bengal, he also helps out with writing speeches for a Mumbai based industrialist who is one of India's wealthiest businessmen and figures in the Top Ten in every "richest men in the world" survey. As such, the spin doctor's calendar is full and Gadkari may have to look elsewhere for a match-winning spinner.

But over at Akbar Road, Congress leaders still do it the old-fashioned way, only the frequency has increased. In the last week alone, minister Ambika Soni, party spokespersons Abhishek Manu Singhvi and Manish Tewari held separate lavish parties for the media and more are in the offing. These are all well-attended and the Congress gets the positive column inches that the government's record doesn't warrant. It only goes to prove that the Grand Old Party hasn't discarded the old dictum that the way to a journalist's moving fingers is through his stomach.

UNLESS it is a terror strike or an alarming law and order situation, it's seldom that the Centre accedes to a request from a state government with such alacrity. Not the least when the request comes from a regional government headed by another party. But when Uttarakhand chief minister Ramesh Pokriyal wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting that he ask Union ministers not to visit Haridwar during the Maha Kumbh, the Centre acted promptly.

Cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrashekar sent out letters to all Union ministers, attaching a copy of the CM's letter. It stated that in view of the massive crowds of devotees expected during the Maha Snan that will go on till the middle of April, the state authorities would not be able to make special arrangements towards the protocol and security for Union Ministers and other VVIPs. In past years, such VVIP visits have led to unpleasant situations when the bigwigs complained of lack of adequate arrangements.

In other cases, withdrawal of police and security apparatus from the general public and their reassignment to VVIP duties have led to uncontrollable, even potentially dangerous situations. Last heard, VVIP traffic to Haridwar is near negligible this year and consequently, there have been no untoward incidents so far. It is to be hoped that the Union ministers have set an example and henceforth will take all directives from the Prime Minister's Office equally seriously.