

---

## Nine per cent growth for 9pc

Posted by Zia - 2008/05/01 14:20

---

THERE are two dangerous moments in the life of any politician. One comes when he has the misfortune to be the messenger of bad news.

Good news is brought by a crowd; bad news is borne by an individual, for the crowd suddenly discovers it has other things to do. The messenger's loyalty and courage are always praised — he may even, in some circumstances, be awarded the Padma Vibhushan— before his tongue is sliced off and deposited in a very cold icebox. Bad news may be necessary, but that does not mean that it is welcome.

The Left Front, which is the raft on which the UPA government has been sailing for four years, decided that it would carry the news about inflation-turmoil to the closed mind into which every government retreats under pressure.

The Left, which is still anxious to save the Manmohan Singh government from self-inflicted wounds, wanted to hear prescriptions. Instead, it got a snuffy sermon based on the extraordinary assertion that “political parties should not politicise the misery of the people”.

Living in Delhi is sufficient to addle what little brains the Almighty has allotted to me, but I find this quite incomprehensible. If political parties do not politicise the misery, what should they politicise? What are they in politics for? To celebrate Diwali every week? Heaven knows, enough politicians do that already. Corruption is so rampant that minimal proprieties have been abandoned. One example is sufficient.

The Prime Minister's Office has written eight letters between November 2007 and February 2008 to the petroleum ministry, headed by Murli Deora, demanding that gas supplies to companies owned by shipping and transport minister T R Baalu's family be expedited. Questions arise: for starters, it would be nice to know how many letters the Prime Minister's Office has written to finance minister P. Chidambaram demanding that inflation be brought under control. But of course the Prime Minister believes that inflation cannot bring down his government, while the DMK can, and therefore its ministers must be appeased.

More interesting: why does it need eight letters on the same subject? The PMO contains the most powerful bureaucrats in the country, backed by the authority of the Prime Minister. No letter can leave the PMO without the PM's personal sanction even if he does not sign the missive himself. Murli Deora is not famous for being subversive, or revolutionary. Why would he need to be told eight times? There can be only one reason: because the PMO's directive demanded that the petroleum ministry flout a rule in order to help the family of a fellow Cabinet minister. The sheer persistence — eight letters in four month — tells its own story.

If only such persistence had been shown, and during the same period, in the effort to curb inflation, the Left might not have needed to remind the government that the Finance Bill had still not been passed, and it could not be passed without the Left's support.

But at least the Prime Minister's formulation recognises that the people are indeed miserable. And when they are miserable it is hardly surprising that they tend to vote against those who have made them miserable. The Congress did have an opportunity in Karnataka to recover in the coming Assembly elections, but inflation seems to have punctured its chances.

Here is a fact of life that Prime Minister Singh and Mrs Sonia Gandhi, his mentor, may want to remember: it is the people who politicise misery when they convert their anger into a vote.

Which brings us to the second danger in the career of a politician. This is visited upon the more fortunate, for only someone who has been permitted to roar as a lion can be castrated into bleating like a scapegoat. You can't make a scapegoat out of a goat, can you?

When the political price of inflation becomes even more evident, there will be clamour within Congress ranks for a public sacrifice. There is already talk that this sacrificial lamb, or goat, will be finance minister Chidambaram. Since no Prime Minister offers his own head as sacrifice, Dr Manmohan Singh will gracefully step aside so that the chap down the pecking order can take the hit.

It is difficult for finance ministers to last the course; the portfolio is simply too demanding. By such norms Chidambaram has done better than most. He can be pleased at the fact that he has presented every Budget since the UPA came to power, and even if he ends up on the political platter his successor will inherit all the problems without the satisfaction of delivering the annual Budget in February. By then the general elections will be upon us, even if they are not brought forward.

---

But what he should be angry about is that it will be his head on the platter when the responsibility for inflation is not his alone, even among his peers. He might be particularly irritated by the fact that no one is raising a finger at his bete noire, Kamal Nath, for instance (the two ministers have been sparring with less courtesy than wrestlers in Haryana).

One factor in the rise of steel prices is because Kamal Nath has pushed the export of iron ore at virtually any cost, both to the exchequer and the environment, and even now refuses to increase export duties. Or Chidambaram might legitimately ask why the DMK ministers, who are the well-heeled guardians and dons of the cement industry in Tamil Nadu, do not get blamed when cement prices rise.

There has always been a disconnect between the misery of the people and the joy of the winners in the 9 per cent growth lottery, as the BJP-led NDA discovered to its horror in the last general election, and as the present government could find out in the next election. As someone archly remarked, India has 9 per cent growth for 9 per cent of its people. Unfortunately for the political and business elite, India has 100 per cent democracy for 100 per cent of its people.

=====