



THE TIMES OF INDIA

A Thought for Today

It's them that take advantage that get advantage i'this world.

—GEORGE ELIOT

Dumping Manmohan

That there is a whole lot wrong with the Congress has been evident for some time now, to be precise, ever since it demitted office five years ago. Lately though the party seems determined to self-destruct. Forget the massive policy confusion within, the Congress chief and her senior colleagues would appear not even to belong to the same party. Or else, Sonia Gandhi wouldn't have been leading a delegation to the prime minister protesting the withdrawal of subsidies even as Manmohan Singh was making the point that non-merit subsidies had eventually to be phased out. The former finance minister is widely regarded as the father of Indian economic reforms. It was the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh combination that slowly but surely dismantled the oppressive licence-quota regime put in place by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi departed from this rigid line, and, indeed, had the good sense to foresee the whole vista of opportunities that computers offered. However, he didn't have the courage to take the process to its logical conclusion. That job was left to Manmohan Singh. The governments that followed carried the process forward with former Congressman P Chidambaram leading the way. Today, thanks to the Manmohan initiative, the Indian economy is wired to the rest of the world, a process and direction no future regime seems in a position to alter. However, this is where the irony lies. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee seems happy enough to give Manmohan Singh his due but not the latter's own party chief. If anything, Mr Vajpayee's suggestion that a consensus be evolved around Manmohonomics coincides with moves within the Congress to review reforms.

Not surprisingly, Manmohan Singh has taken affront. After all, the Congress has gone along with every single proposal of the NDA on reforms. It seconded the government moves on insurance, patents and telecom regulation, and in the process, was party to the reversal of its own earlier policies. More recently, party stalwarts, the Congress chief included, vocally slammed the cuts in subsidies announced by Yashwant Sinha. And yet, when the finance minister arrived in the Lok Sabha to pass the budget, there was not a murmur from the Congress. Had the party seriously wanted to block the move, it should have been easy enough to mobilise support given the considerable opposition from within the NDA to the hike in food and fertiliser prices. The forum for saying no to a policy or proposal is Parliament. Having missed that opportunity, perhaps deliberately, the Congress chief now leads protest delegations to every VIP door in sight. The Congress must know from experience that histrionics of this kind can only recoil on it. The party paid heavily for its doublespeak on the Babri Masjid and Shah Bano case and continues to equivocate on the nuclear question, where again the way forward was actually shown by Congress prime ministers. The poor have no time for theatrics. So, instead of shedding futile tears for them, maybe the Congress should graciously accept credit when it is offered and take the high moral ground on Manmohonomics. That way, it can at least prevent a second exodus from the party.