

By Sidharth Mishra



The debate in the Parliament on demonetisation is lying in limbo with the Opposition and the treasury benches unable to find a meeting point to start dialogue. The last word so far in the debate has been from former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. In his quarter of a century long political career, the veteran public servant for sure has shown the knack to use famous quotes at appropriate times to demolish the adversary. On such occasions, especially when under fire, he has also shown the unique quality to maintain an expressionless silence.

No wonder last fortnight he took refuge once again in quotes to corner Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the policy of demonetisation. Two excerpts from his seven-minute-long address are worth mentioning. The first, “Even those who say that this measure will do harm or cause distress in the short term but be in the interests of the country in the long run should be reminded of what John Keynes said once -- In the long run all of us are dead.”

The second being, “So, in all these measures, convince me that the way this scheme has been implemented is a monumental management failure, and in fact, it is a case of organised loot, legalised plunder of the common people.” The speech immediately reminded me of Singh retaining his traits as politicians even at this ripe age and probably during his last term in Parliament.

Many say that Singh showed first streaks of being politically clever when he made that famous statement of “Caesar’s wife should be above suspicion” about his mentor P V Narasimha Rao, whom the Congressmen had started to desert after Rao lost office of Prime Minister following the defeat of Congress in 1996 election. But that’s not true.

Manmohan Singh hopped jobs as Chairman of the University Grants Commission, adviser to the Prime Minister, Governor of Reserve Bank of India, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, and Chief Economic Adviser because of his ability to underplay his role and being ‘obedient’ to his leader. Thus, from being a votary for reforms under P V Narasimha Rao to presiding over a regime which put severe strain on the government finances through its dole out schemes, Manmohan Singh played the perfect role of second fiddle to his leader. That political

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trait which not many leaders possess.

While I do not have much to express angst over his “in the long run all of us are dead,” quote but certainly resent his saying that demonetisation, “(is) a case of organised loot, legalised plunder of the common people.” Manmohan Singh’s tenure as the Prime Minister would undoubtedly be remembered for its cases of corruption and then Prime Minister backing the corrupt.

Manmohan Singh’s actions have always had a political method. He left the accountability of his government to Parliament in the hands of party leadership. A seeker of jobs, he did his master’s bidding without qualms, which in turn gave him all the support and affection. Having presided over a corrupt regime for a decade, Manmohan Singh should be the last person talking about demonetisation being “a case of organised loot, legalised plunder of the common people.”

Manmohan Singh may have been most uncharismatic but nevertheless, he has been a very effective politician. His team too consisted of men who like him did not have the political flamboyance nor the clout in public but succeeded on the basis of the sheer backing of their mentor. Singh’s disciples never received any retribution from him in public and he defended their ‘acts of corruption’ on party forums. In fact, the defence of his chosen ones made Manmohan Singh a preferred choice for many Congressmen who felt more comfortable in his company rather than remain in the tutelage of 10 Janpath, which washed hands off them on the first sniff of taint.

Manmohan Singh had no qualms in changing the yardsticks when it came to defending his own men in the government – Iqbal Singh, Anand Sharma, Ashwani Kumar, and Pawan Kumar Bansal. He even retained M S Gill for as long as he could. Through out his tenure in the Prime Minister's Office, Manmohan Singh proved that defending the indefensible was the hallmark of his politics.

Then Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry Iqbal Singh’s name figured prominently as one of the facilitator’s for Kashinath Tapuria and Hasan Ali Khan, who are alleged to have laundered the bribe money paid in the 2G spectrum allotment scam. Several people including Telecom Minister A Raja lost their job but not Iqbal Singh.

Similarly, his Commerce Minister Anand Sharma was in the eye of the storm when information about Walmart spending money on Indian establishment for allowing foreign direct investment in retail surfaced. Sharma survived the controversy thanks to the backing he got from the Prime Minister. The Congress party even tried to brazen out of the crisis created by then Law Minister Ashwani Kumar and then Railway Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal. It is another matter that then Prime Minister extracted huge political price for defending his men. While he defended Iqbal Singh, he cared little about the political loss UPA suffered for not defending Raja and DMK MP N Kanimozhi, which led to snapping of ties between the two allies.

His Machiavellian traits were on full display during the interaction with television editors in 2011, when he - rather his government - faced barrage of corruption charges. “I have never felt like quitting, I will stay the course. I never felt like resigning because I had a job to do,” he had

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told the editors and had defended corruption indulged into by the coalition partners saying, "In a coalition government, there is a coalition dharma." He had even washed his hands about the failings of his government saying, "I am not that big a culprit as being made out to be." A seeker of jobs who knows the economist-politician may be doing his master's bidding from another innings.

(Sidharth Mishra is Consulting Editor,
[Millennium Post](#)
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