



# Like flawed Honest Abe, Singh should aim for greatness

*The Indian leader's last year in office is the time to show some spine*

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As prime minister Manmohan Singh enters his final year in office, he is likely to be hoping to go down in history as the man who made India a miracle economy, growing at 8.5 per cent a year. However, after a series of scandals, critics say he stands to be remembered for presiding over New Delhi's most corrupt regime ever.

Nobody doubts his personal integrity. He has long been seen as an honest man struggling against the tide in dishonest times. But the Teflon is finally wearing off. In May he tried to save the jobs of two ministers: one accused by the Supreme Court of interfering in a probe of an alleged coal mines allotment scam; the other following the arrest of his nephew over a disputed bribery allegation. Both ultimately had to resign.

The Supreme Court accused Mr Singh of trying to convert the Central Bureau of Investigation, which is examining the coal case, into a "caged parrot". Columnists who once sympathised with him now say he is tainted by complicity.

I think history will judge him more positively: it usually lionises people achieving difficult goals in tainted times. Consider, for example, Abraham Lincoln, as portrayed in last year's Oscar-winning biopic. *Lincoln* graphically shows the dirty tricks and bribes the 16th US president used to ensure passage of the bill abolishing slavery. Yet this did not diminish his heroic stature, in the film or in history books. Indeed, he is popularly remembered as "Honest Abe".

American politics was highly corrupt in Lincoln's time. There was no permanent civil service, so hundreds of important (and lucrative) positions could be given by the president to his supporters. "To the victor the spoils" was the motto of the day. It could also be the motto of contemporary Indian politics.

Lincoln was not an idealist demanding freedom from slavery as a fundamental right. Rather, he held that the constitution gave each state the right to keep or abolish slavery. He won the Republican nomination to run for president in 1860 because delegates thought his moderate

stance would win more votes than outright abolitionism, especially in the border states between north and south (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware).

Lincoln tried hard to avoid civil war. He repeatedly said his aim was to preserve the union, and for this he was willing to tolerate southern slavery. But once the war began, he conveniently changed his own views. He decided in 1862 that, using war powers, he had the authority to issue the emancipation proclamation.

This did not make slavery illegal throughout the land: it freed slaves only in those southern states that had rebelled. It did not apply to border states, whose support Lincoln viewed as absolutely crucial. He once said: "I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky."

For all that, history does not treat Lincoln as a practitioner of realpolitik or bribery. It treats him as a hero who abolished slavery. What matters, ultimately, is the greatness of an achievement rather than the means to achieve it.

Going by this logic, history will view Mr Singh positively, too. Memories of his government's scandals will fade. He will be remembered as the finance minister who initiated the nation's economic reforms in 1991-96, and who as prime minister in 2004-13 made India a miracle economy. Earlier, the success of the Asian Tigers led to theories that fast growth was possible only in autocracies. But Mr Singh proved that democracies – even messy ones – can become miracle economies, too.

As in Lincoln's case, critics will say he has escaped too lightly. In his first cabinet in 2004, he had seven politicians facing criminal charges – including murder and fraud. But these were the nominees of small parties whose support was vital for his government's survival. For Mr Singh, the compulsions of survival trumped morality.

In his second term, too, Mr Singh was often urged to sack dubious colleagues. He replied: "I am not in the business of losing my government's majority."

However, as he approaches his final year in office, Mr Singh should show some spine, and not simply bank on history's forgiveness. In particular, he should push aggressively for two pieces of legislation. One is the long-postponed bill for creating the Lokpal, an anti-corruption body. The second is a bill providing statutory autonomy for the CBI, meeting the Supreme Court's demand for a truly independent body.

These two bills will not end corruption. If given teeth, however, they might just start the reversal of the current moral morass. Mr Singh's place in history as an economic reformer is assured but he should aim for a higher goal: to be remembered as the man who took the first step towards cleansing Indian politics.

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