



Presidential twist

In cricket, a googly at best claims a single, unsuspecting victim. In politics, a googly can strike, wound and benumb an entire party, as is evident from the Congress's shocked — and overly delayed — reaction to the audacious shortlist of Presidential candidates presented by Mamata Banerjee and Mulayam Singh. In the event, the Congress' rejection of the regional duo's proposal, nearly 24 hours after it was made, has only reinforced the perception that the party's reflexes have dulled irretrievably and it has no leadership to speak of. It was out of the question that the Congress could choose among the three names so casually proposed by Ms Banerjee and Mr. Singh. Not after the West Bengal Chief Minister had outed the Congress's own preference for Rashtrapati Bhawan — Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee as first choice followed by Vice-President Hamid Ansari. And certainly not after Ms Banerjee and Mr. Singh had dared to include Manmohan Singh in their list of three, the other two being Abdul Kalam and Somnath Chatterjee. Ms Banerjee and Mr. Singh were in fact suggesting that the Congress change its Prime Minister, a proposal the party should have rejected instantly, without a second thought. Indeed, it should have been evident to the Congress that Ms Banerjee and Mr. Singh had dragged Dr. Singh into the presidential contest with the sole intention of unsettling and embarrassing the leadership troika of Ms Gandhi, Dr. Singh and Mr. Mukherjee. As it turned out, the ploy worked and a paralysed Congress showed itself incapable of mustering the strength and clarity required to deal with the situation.

For their part Ms Banerjee and Mr. Singh should think through the long-term consequences of their opportunistic behaviour. Of the three Presidential probables they have suggested, their real choice is Dr. Kalam. But the former President, though not averse to a second term, would expect to be elected unopposed. Ms Banerjee also ought to know that she cannot expect to remain in the UPA after breaking ranks with it on something so serious as the Presidential election. Nor can she be a part of any third alternative in which the Left parties have a role to play. Is she prepared to go to the Lok Sabha polls with her wagons hitched to the BJP? The Congress has paid a heavy price for its smug assumption that its allies would go along with any unilateral decision it made on the Presidential nominee. Not surprisingly, Sharad Pawar too has asked for wider consultations within the UPA. The Congress must act on this advice if it is at all to salvage a situation made difficult by its own hubris and indecision.