

## BNP should re-think its response to RPO

*Priority today is a return to democratic government*

THE Bangladesh Nationalist Party has rejected the provisions of the Representation of the People Ordinance (RPO) promulgated on August 19 in their entirety. It is a most unfortunate position for the party to have adopted. What makes it even more worrying is that the BNP has not given out the reasons behind its rejection of the RPO.

We as a responsible media take BNP's rejection very seriously and hence would like to know the reasons, arguments and facts behind such a sweeping rejection. But regrettably no explanation has been forthcoming except that there is not enough time left to carry out the reform. The problem of time limitation is something we sympathise with and squarely blame the Election Commission for having created it by taking far too long in readying the RPO.

But the whole of RPO cannot be rejected just on the basis of time constraint.

We need to state yet once more that the people of Bangladesh expect qualitative changes to come about in national politics through the general elections in December this year. Such provisions of the RPO as doing away with overseas branches of political parties, the requirement for intending candidates to provide the Election Commission with eight items of information about themselves, measures regarding a violation of the code of conduct, women's increased representation in party committees and a bottom-up nomination process vis-à-vis the selection of party candidates for elections certainly merit serious consideration. All of us are eagerly waiting for a transition back to democratic government, of the kind that will really and truly deliver the goods and thereby provide meaningful substance to our projected structure of political pluralism. The cavalier fashion in which the party rejected the ordinance ought not to have come from the BNP when the nation pretty much overwhelmingly agrees that reforms in the political process are today an absolute necessity. We will therefore reiterate here that the nation deserves better than the obstructionist position put forth by the BNP.

In this context, we note with happiness the response of the Awami League, which has after careful re-evaluation come round to accepting, by and large, the RPO. We now urge the BNP to do the same and thus make it possible for democracy to make a new beachhead in Bangladesh. The national priority today is a revival of elected, transparent and accountable government. Anyone or any party putting up roadblocks to the attainment of such a grand endeavour will really be doing all of us a huge disservice.

## Avoidable violence in RMG sector

*High time worker-management relationship is streamlined*

THE garment sector, afflicted by labour unrest in recent times, got into trouble once more on Saturday when garment workers went on rampage in the city's Malibagh area demanding festival bonus. The owners reportedly declined to pay more than 25 percent of the basic pay as bonus.

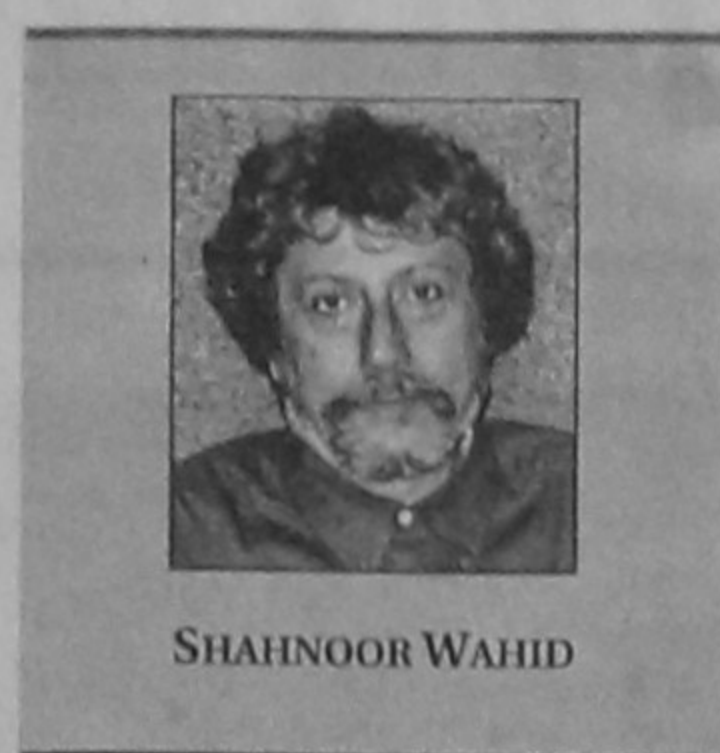
The latest flare-up, in which at least 40 vehicles were damaged, is a clear indication of too many things going wrong between the owners and the workers. But why must the public suffer through the vandalism of workers that is reprehensible and the insensitivity of the management towards the workers legitimate demands which is untenable? The workers of the factory in Malibagh have claimed that the owners had promised to pay full bonus this year, after having paid 25 percent of the basic pay last year. If the claim is true, then there has been a clear breach of commitment on the part of the owner. The BGMEA's response to the violent incident appeared to be rather perfunctory and elusive, as its general secretary stated that payment of bonus was an internal matter of a factory and that such payment was not mandatory.

If we consider the developments in the sector as a whole over the last couple of years, we have seen the workers agitating for arrear salaries and overtime bills which doesn't indicate that the owners are sensitive enough to the genuine grievances of the workers.

We believe the owners have to fulfill the legitimate demands of the workers, while the latter must refrain from turning violent on hearing news of atrocity or rumour of fatality without verifying truth. But we believe, there must be some legitimate representatives from amongst the workers to interact and negotiate with the owners on a continuing basis. That is a void which needs to be filled.

Our concern is multiplied by the global financial crisis which may hit our RMG sector in the days ahead. Unfortunately, the local industry is finding it hard to run smoothly when enhancing productivity and diversifying products are needed to save the industry from any negative impact. We must put it back on the right track.

## The prisoners of conscience



SHAHNOOR WAHID

IN the classic novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* by Anthony Hope (Published in 1894), the false prince becomes a prisoner of conscience when he was crowned as the king of Ruritania since he was a look-alike of the real prince, who was being held hostage by some rogue officials who plotted to capture the throne of the tiny country.

The false prince was being helped by some loyal followers of the real prince, and they persuaded him to go through with the coronation so that the rogues could not succeed in their heinous plot. At the end, after lots of drama and melodrama, the real prince is freed and the false prince

### SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

What do we hear about these from the politicians and their parties? Do they have profound ideas about the dimensions of the problems and do they have some concrete, pragmatic policies to address them? Whenever we raise these issues before them they blame the government formed by their rivals. They would find the right words and expressions to cite some examples of wrong-doings by the oppositions but would never concede their own mistakes and follies.

(the look-alike) steps down from the throne and puts the crown on the former's head. He bows gracefully before the rightful owner of the throne and walks away to his own world. He is no more a prisoner of conscience.

In our country, we have seen many prisoners of many hues but have we seen any prisoner of conscience amongst them? Are there people who would willingly relieve themselves of all their sinful thoughts, anti-people acts and immoral schemes, and walk away a lighter man? Are there people who, given a throne to sit on, would hand it over to the one to whom it truly belongs without

hesitating for a moment? We hardly see such people around us. You want examples? Well, we have seen how an Awami League big gun came out of hospital and unhesitatingly sat on the chair already occupied by someone else. We have also seen how the game of merry-go-round was played by some of the BNP big guns for the throne of secretary general, haven't we?

That was a crass show that created a lot of bitterness about politics in Bangladesh in our minds. Is politics all about sitting on the throne of power and then doing nothing else? What the political parties have on their

manifestos besides grabbing power is an issue that always intrigues.

The country is burdened with various problems, each of Herculean proportion, beginning with a burgeoning population. Then we have problems in the agriculture sector, education sector, water and sanitation sector, health sector, industry sector, law and order sector, and so on.

What do we hear about these from the politicians and their parties? Do they have profound ideas about the dimensions of the problems and do they have some concrete, pragmatic policies to

address them? Whenever we raise these issues before them they blame the government formed by their rivals. They would find the right words and expressions to cite some examples of wrong-doings by the oppositions but would never concede their own mistakes and follies. They are hardly examples of prisoners of conscience.

But can a nation progress and reach the coveted goals if the political and social leaders have had their conscience surgically removed? People without conscience are dangerous people. They could turn into mindless demons capable of doing and undoing anything to our utter horror. And we have seen many such demons partaking in gorging on the flesh of the nation in devilish glee. For a while we had suffered from the illusion that we had gotten rid of them. But we were so wrong.

Election bells are ringing. The big guns in BNP are asking for the election to be held under the laws of their time. While Awami League said they wanted full implementation of RPO, party

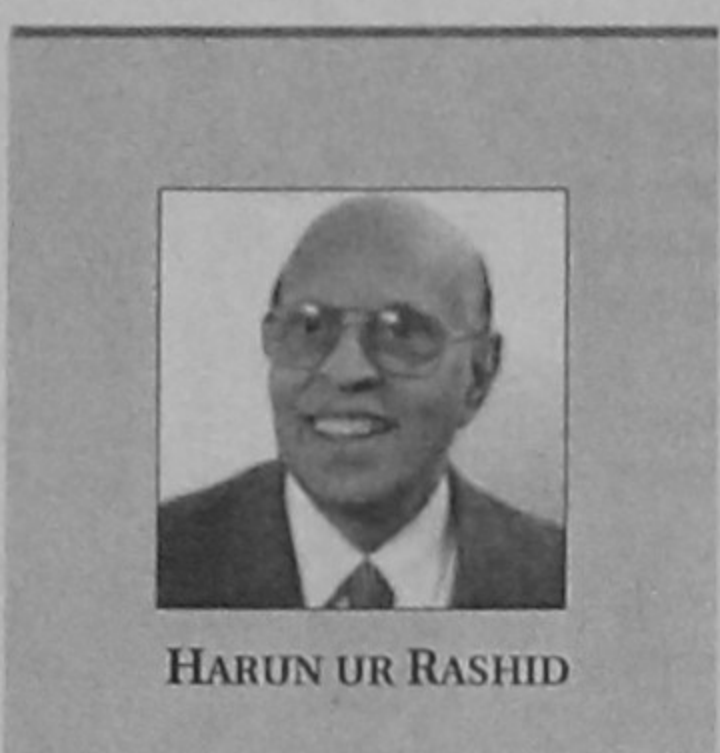
registration, code of conduct, and so on, BNP is refusing to abide by what is included in the RPO, including the clause for registration of the political parties, without some major amendments. Now this stance of BNP and its allies is going to change the course of the game of politics in the country.

All said and done, we are looking forward to an election of convenience with most players coming out happy with portions of the booty. Once the election dust settles and leaders speed away to the capital in their newly grabbed Lexuses and Hummers, the common people will be left to suck their thumbs and wonder aloud: "Huh! What have we got from all the hullabaloo!" Like their hungry ancestors they will go back to their world of hunger and despair.

The country needs more people who are prisoners of conscience. Let us vote for such people after successfully identifying them. Let us not make any mistake this time.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## A friend in deed



HARUN UR RASHID

ON September 14, Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed went to China for a four-day visit at the invitation of the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. The visit is bound to strengthen the existing bilateral relations in all their aspects.

During the visit of the Chinese foreign minister to Bangladesh in April, he called on the chief adviser and invited him on behalf of the Chinese PM.

The CA held official talks with the Chinese prime minister on September 15. On the same day he called on President Hu Jintao.

**China: Emerging global power**  
China is the fourth largest economy in the world. Within a few years China's GDP is expected to surpass the world's third largest economy, Germany. China's strategic and economic importance has been recognised by G8 leaders, and it was invited to their summit in Japan last July.

China's economy continues to soar, prompting many to call it Asia's "waking giant." It is the economy that overwhelms all other aspects of the relations between China and the West.

In what appears to be a marriage of convenience for both sides, the West has taken a softer approach towards China. For example, all the important leaders from the West, including President Bush, attended the inauguration of the Beijing Olympics last month.

China is taking a more active role at the UN. Its increasing confidence, diplomatic dexterity, and veto-wielding power in the UN Security Council has been demon-

strated with care and caution.

Bangladesh is fully aware that China is emerging as a great military and economic power, and, being sandwiched between China and India, is deeply interested in extending its cooperation with both the countries in a globalised world, where economies are being integrated.

**Dynamics of bilateral relations**  
Few people realise that China is 100 kilometres across the Himalayas from Bangladesh. Bangladesh's relation with China dates back centuries. A Buddhist monk, Atish Dipankar from Vikrampur, travelled to China in the 11th century and preached Buddhism for 17 years.

He died in modern day China Tibet, and the Chinese government returned his ashes to his birthplace as a mark of friendship between the two countries.

Since the opening of diplomatic relations 33 years ago, bilateral relations have been founded on mutual trust and respect.

From the very beginning, Bangladesh has adhered to Chinese three "nos" policy to Taiwan -- no independence, no representation to international bodies and no two China. This means that Bangladesh considers Taiwan an integral part of China.

Dhaka's unambiguous stance in March to support the Beijing Olympics, when violence took place in Lhasa and there was a call for boycott of the Olympics, must have pleased China.

President Ziaur Rahman made the first official visit to China in 1977, leading to visits by all the heads of Bangladesh government,

which consolidated relations between the two countries. President Ershad visited China six times during his presidency.

Bilateral relations reached their peak in 2005, when the two countries celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Premier Wen Jiabao paid a state visit to Bangladesh in April 2005, and the prime minister of Bangladesh paid a return visit within three months.

Generating \$4.2 billion worth of trade in 2007, Sino-Bangladesh relationship is founded on the cornerstone of economic cooperation. Bangladesh is also China's third largest trade partner in South Asia.

Chinese entrepreneurs are encouraged to invest in Bangladesh in areas such as infrastructure, textiles, electronics, information technology and ceramics.

Other agreements signed between the countries include areas such as agriculture, transport and communications, machinery, energy, science and technology. A Joint Economic Commission was constituted in 1983.

China has shown interest in the mining sector and a Chinese company was given the lease in Khalaspir coalfield in Rangpur district. It also signed an agreement in 2000 to set up a feasibility study in utilising waters from hilly areas for generating power, including the possibility of hydro-electric power from Matanuhuri and Sangur rivers.

China provided loans and grants to Bangladesh and heavily invested in infrastruc-

ture. The Muktarpur Bridge over River Dhaleswari was the sixth bridge built and completed in February this year. All the bridges have contributed to interconnectivity within the country and boosted trade and economic growth.

During the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to Bangladesh in April this year, he offered Tk.6,000 million in "free aid" to Bangladesh and Tk. 5 million in "token gift" to mark his visit to the country. He showed interest in assisting in the generation of nuclear energy in the plant in Rooppur.

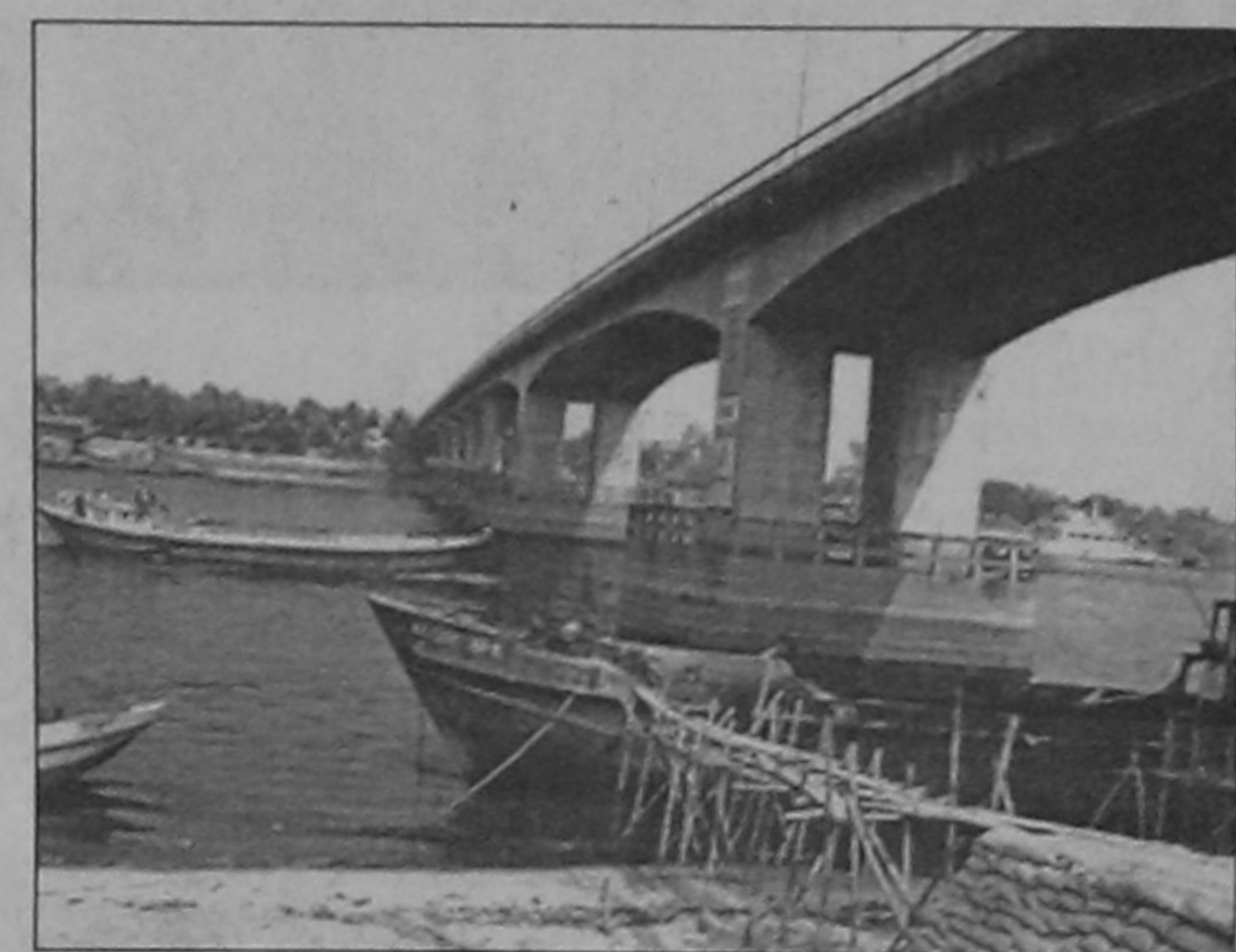
**Talks fruitful**  
Official talks between Bangladesh and China were held at the Great Hall of the People on September 16, where Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed led the Bangladesh side while Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, headed the host country.

China will provide special preferential treatment for access of some Bangladeshi products to its market to reduce the prevailing trade imbalance between the two countries, and cooperate in implementation of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant for peaceful purpose.

Beijing will also consider Dhaka's request for engaging China in the Bangladesh-Myanmar Road Link scheme meant for enhancing trade and people-to-people contact.

Chinese leaders also assured cooperation in constructing bridges on the Meghna and the Gumti. Besides, they will provide technological support in developing hybrid seeds.

Three agreements on cooperation were concluded during the



Symbol of friendship.

visit. This speaks for the relevance of Bangladesh in China's South Asia policy.

**Strategic importance of Bangladesh to China**

The two countries have worked closely in the multilateral forums, particularly in the UN, by focusing on development and peace issues. The strategic importance of Bangladesh in China's South Asia policy is obvious. Let me enumerate a few:

Bangladesh stands between China and India, and both are emerging as global economic and political powers. Bangladesh's cooperation may help achieve their goals in South Asia.

Bangladesh has a sizeable middle class of about 40 million and is emerging as a lucrative market for China.

Bangladesh is a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. Its membership of Asean Regional Forum has made Bangladesh critically important for any country that wishes to engage in South and South East Asia.

China has built a train line from Beijing to Lhasa (Tibet) and plans to extend it to Kathmandu (Nepal). If interconnectivity and transit routes are in place within South Asia Dhaka may connect a link to Beijing through Kathmandu.

Bangladesh is a member of the Commonwealth, Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement and the UN. Few countries are members of all these organisations. Bangladesh can play an important role in ensuring global peace and harmony, and it has considerable influence among the members of the OIC. Its role in curbing Islamic extremism within the country has been praised by the international community.

Sino-Bangladesh relations have been characterised by comprehensive partnership of cooperation, based on mutual respect and trust, with China for more than 32 years.

Bangladesh could find understanding in China of its problems and concerns to reduce poverty through economic growth and development.

The basic course of Bangladesh's relationship with China has been firmly set, and will continue for further expansion. The visit, although a brief one, will consolidate relations for mutual benefit of peoples of both countries.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## This is important

At a moment like this, to discuss who is the pig and who the lipstick in a shopworn simile is a sign that you've gone down a dark road and wound up in a cul-de-sac. Who cares if you like Sarah Palin, if your kid plays hockey and so do hers? Here is the only thing about anyone's kids that matters now: every time you vote you make your kids a promise. It's a promise that you will look past cheap slogans and lazy alliances to try to find a way to make America worthy of a new generation.

ANNA QUINDLEN

TODAY is the first day of the rest of this presidential election. Pay close attention. Do not get sidetracked. This is a message to myself, I, too, got snookered by small-bore bickering and secondary ephemera. I sat in front of the television and listened as so-called surrogates for the candidates played gotcha with obfuscation, misdirection and outright lies.

A presidential election is a game now and we're not playing

we're getting played. With very few exceptions -- hats off to you, David Gergen -- nothing being said has much to do with the future of this country or the well-being of its citizens. As a wise woman said to me the other day, talking points and talking are two very different things.

Once again, we find ourselves planting our flag amid rubble. Now it is the rubble of the American economy, with great financial institutions faltering and falling and the stock market

every which way.

Rubble has become the symbol of this country over the past eight years: the still-un-addressed rubble of a decimated New Orleans, the growing rubble on the streets of Iraq.

At such a time, considering whether a tanning bed was installed in the governor's mansion in Alaska amounts to holding a barbecue on the lip of the volcano. For months I have been wondering how anyone could believe that Barack Obama, who

has worshiped at a Christian church in Chicago for many years, was a Muslim.

Then, in the space of a few hours, I received dozens of copies of a bogus list of books the Republican vice presidential candidate had allegedly banned from a local library while serving as mayor. The right no longer holds the patent on cyberbull. It is everywhere.

Maybe this campaign, which looked so promising, so dedicated to real issues and real change a year ago, can now get back on course. The debates are nigh, and they are crucial. The country is in a mess. And in November its citizens must decide who has the integrity, the intellect, the principles to steer us out of it.

Voters must become educated consumers to make that decision. They must draw on multiple sources, not just one. They must be conscious of what is fact, what

is spin and what is opinion in a media world in which pundits seem to outnumber reporters.

For example, here's my opinion: the only good news in last week's economic earthquake was that the political dialogue took a turn toward the substantive. But John McCain took a sad turn -- a U-turn -- for the worse.

For most of the past 20 years McCain was a senator who was sure and stubborn and stood for certain things, many of them things with which I disagree. But disagreement is honorable; shape-shifting is not.

In the space of a single news cycle Senator McCain went from being a longtime supporter of deregulation to a man inveighing against the lack of government oversight in the financial markets. He railed against the greed of Wall Street when Wall Street has been the ancestral home of his party.

In a speech after the 2000 race,

Senator McCain had this to say about shifting his stance on the flying of the Confederate flag: "I feared that if I answered honestly, I could not win the South Carolina primary. So I chose to compromise my principles."

Surrounded by the acolytes of Karl Rove, the carnivorous political operative who once savaged him, with a running mate he seems to have chosen out of calculation rather than the best interests of the country, Senator McCain last week was once again hedging principle in favour of victory.

His party has been in power as the country has run aground, yet he and his people try to suggest that the same party with the same people and the same policies will somehow produce different results.

Am I wrong to assume this is preposterous? If so, the senator needs to explain how at the

debates. Both he and Senator Obama need to provide detailed and incisive answers, not rote snippets from their stump speeches.

Perhaps this is the race in which voters will not be charmed by affect or ripostes. After all, eight years ago, the American people embraced a good ole boy at the polls and wound up with a man neither insightful nor intellectual enough to manage the nation.

The presidency was once aspirational. Voters wanted someone smarter, better informed, stronger than they were.

It can't possibly be that we've become so insecure about our power, our primacy, our place in the world that we can't bear a person who stands on principle. It can't really be that America has become a nation so small-minded that intellect must be belittled. It can't really be about likability, can

it? I don't need the president to be my friend. I have friends. What I need is someone to clean up the mess George W. Bush has made of the country I love.

At a moment like this, to discuss who is the pig and who the lipstick in a shopworn simile is a sign that you've gone down a dark road and wound up in a cul-de-sac. Who cares if you like Sarah Palin, if your kid plays hockey and so do hers? Here is the only thing about anyone's kids that matters now: every time you vote you make your kids a promise. It's a promise that you will look past cheap slogans and lazy alliances to try to find a way to make America worthy of a new generation. And if we keep that promise in November, we not only keep faith with our children, we keep faith with the country.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.