The Stuntmen in Politics

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There are all those times when someone truly important comes along and informs us of all the characteristics of behaviour he shares with us. We are impressed, at least initially, for we see in such men an absence of the arrogance which all too often pushes so many individuals in public life down the road to disaster.

In recent times, Arvind Kejriwal has been exercising minds not just in India but elsewhere in the subcontinent as well. He has little wish to have the Delhi chief minister's official residence as his home. And despite some goons attacking the offices of his Aam Aadmi Party, he is reluctant to have any kind of security brought in to ward off similar threats in the future. Now that is all right, for populism is something people relate to almost immediately. A politician who suddenly finds himself in power, as Kejriwal has, is often tempted into flaunting his credentials as a citizen like millions of others. The point, though, is whether or not such populism can be sustained for a long time.

Which takes us back to the early days of Jimmy Carter's presidency in the United States. Watergate destroyed not only Richard Nixon but also the presidential career of his successor Gerald Ford. Carter was therefore a refreshing change for America in 1976. He was obsessed with the idea of being seen as a man of the people, to which end he decided that the first thing to do was to walk to the White House after his inauguration in early 1977. He was the first and so far the last president to walk on inauguration day. And once installed as president, he decreed that 'Hail to the Chief' be done away with because it gave him a feeling of imperiousness. It was not until Ronald Reagan arrived in the White House in January 1981 that 'Hail to the Chief' was restored.



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When you look back on such acts, it is not hard to see that they were basically stunts that in the end amounted to little. In any case, since stunts have something of the unreal associated with them, they do not survive. Former Maldives President Nasheed, eager to draw attention to the effects climate change would have on his tiny country, once held a cabinet meeting under water. Now, must a leader do that sort of thing when there are a thousand and one ways in which you can focus on such issues as