

Now pick up the reins

IN ELECTING THE senior party leader and experienced administrator, Mr. P. V. Narasimha Rao, as the leader of the parliamentary party, the Congress(I) has taken the first step towards a healthier political existence. Even if the insistence on a "consensus" rather than a contest might suggest a shying away from what should be normal democratic practice, the anxiety to avoid the abrasive overtones of a direct contest is understandable.

First, the Congress(I) is only now emerging from the protective cocoon of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, a transition that is particularly painful, forcing as it does the century-old organisation to come to terms with the blunt fact that it will have to redefine its identity in the context of contemporary political realities. Second, given that the Congress(I) has failed to get an absolute majority in this election, having been nearly decimated in the two key States of the Hindi heartland, U.P. and Bihar, it can ill afford to present the image of a house divided just as it is preparing to form a minority Government. Thus the Maharashtra Chief Minister, Mr. Sharad Pawar, a powerful contender for the top post gave in with good grace, clearing the way for the consensus candidate, Mr. Narasimha Rao.

We congratulate Mr. Rao on his well deserved selection. Having been a senior Minister in the Governments of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and for the most part possessing a record of sober political counsel on the several critical issues, Mr. Rao is the best person to lead the party at this juncture. While it might be held against him that he does not have a mass base to speak of, in his favour is the point that in contrast to the strong currents of opposition that the candidacies of various faction leaders are bound to evoke, Mr. Rao's choice will be relatively non-controversial, thus ensuring a good measure of stability for his leadership. Mr. Rao's election creates a record of sorts in the fact that he is the first Congress(I) parliamentary party leader from outside the State of Uttar Pradesh. This is certainly a healthy symbolic touch for the federal character of the polity.

Having been entrusted with the leadership of the post-dynasty Congress(I), Mr. Rao has a unique opportunity to restructure the organisation's democratic traditions

and structure. The organisational elections which process was interrupted by the announcement of general elections must be taken up again. The other crucial aspect of the internal democracy which was so visibly absent in the era of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi — of involving a wider range of political counsel within the party on several key decisions — must be reactivated.

Mr. Narasimha Rao takes the centre-stage at a particularly critical moment in this country's political life. The frustrating verdict of Election 91 has injected an element of instability into the present context, given that the minority Government of the Congress(I) cannot embark on a very ambitious programme without the support of the Opposition. For the moment, the National Front-Left combine have said that they would prefer to sit in the Opposition and give support on certain issues. While one might understand the "political dilemma" that these parties face, as Mr. V. P. Singh put it the other day, it must be pointed out that the country is passing through a very critical period and the search for a "consensus" on issues relating to national security, national unity and law and order cannot be dismissed as a cliched political response.

Too much is at stake for the country to be satisfied with the promise from the National Front and its Left allies that they will support the Government on certain issues. The National Front and the Left should consider very seriously the suggestion that they join the Congress(I) in a coalition Government. True, it might mean surrendering their own political interests and putting the national interest first. But the country needs a respite from the abrasive accents of the politicking of the last two years and the best healing touch would be for the Congress(I) to sit down with the National Front and the Left to work on a point-by-point agreement on the agenda of the new Government.

The implications of the challenge of the BJP are far too serious to ignore. The bruising events of the last two years which started with the unlocking of the gates of the main structure of the Babri Masjid-Ramajanmabhoomi complex and culminated in the Rath Yatra and its aftermath of a crescendo of communal violence have badly frightened the minorities. The first priority is to reaffirm the commitment to a secular polity, in tones that are loud and clear.

Several hard decisions await the new Government — on Punjab, Kashmir and Assam. On the various secessionist threats. On the economy, where politically sensitive choices will have to be made such as having to go to the IMF for another loan. The new Government would also have to be nimble in its response to what is fast becoming an alarming deterioration of the law and order situation. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination highlighted dramatically the vulnerability of this country and its leadership. The new Government will have to painstakingly grapple with each and every implication of this horrifying event in terms of reexamining certain policy courses and goals in the arena of national security.

We urge Mr. Rao and the Congress(I) to invite the National Front-Left combine to join a coalition Government which can bring the requisite confidence and support to the decision-making process at a crucial period. The last two years have demonstrated how the national interest was held hostage by partisan considerations. Issues as critical as Punjab have been politicised. If the Congress(I) is serious about seizing this opportunity to present itself as a party that can govern, its first task should be to obtain a national consensus on the major issues involving national security, national integrity and the economy and to start implementing that collective resolve.