

# Go with your gut, Obama

The people want bold decisions — they aren't going to nail leaders to campaign promises

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN



**S**TAN GREENBERG, one of America's most experienced pollsters, sums up the key lesson he learned polling for Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, Ehud Barak and Tony Blair: "Bold leaders in tumultuous times always have at least one crash."

They never come out of the box and deliver the scale of progress and change they promise — not because they are cynical, but because events conspire against them and they encounter competing power centres. What distinguishes the best leaders, he says, is that they learn from their crashes, adjust, persist and succeed.

President Obama has hardly crashed. He's just getting started. And many, many people — at home and abroad — are rooting for him to succeed. But he definitely is navigating tumultuous times. So when Greenberg called to share the lessons from his new book, *Dispatches from the War Room* — an insider's account about how the world leaders for whom he polled handled their crashes — I thought: "Those insights might be very useful right now."

Greenberg kicks off with Bill Clinton. One of his most vivid memories was trying to judge how voters would react to Clinton breaking his oft-stated promise to cut middle-class taxes, right after his 1992 election. They held focus groups in New Jersey. What struck him most, said Greenberg, was that these voters "just didn't believe any politician would cut their taxes." That wasn't how they were judging Clinton.

"They didn't care about his specific promises," said Greenberg. "They wanted the new president to act in the long-term economic interests of the country. They wanted to make sure everyone was part of the solution, not like in Reagan's years when the wealthy didn't pay their fair share. And they wanted to know that the president wouldn't lose his instinct to look out for ordinary people."

Lesson: "Don't be too literal about campaign promises," said Greenberg. "There is a lot of scope for governing, if



the people think you're acting in the country's long-term interests and that you're working for them."

Tony Blair crashed over New Labour's core identity as a party. Labour had been out of power for 18 years. It got back in thanks to Blair's ability to assure voters that they could trust Labour to be fiscally prudent and, simultaneously, to upgrade Britain's decrepit government hospitals and schools.

In truth, Blair had to do these serially — first fix the economy and then the hospitals and schools. But he implied that he would do them simultaneously. When, three years into his term, the lack of new investment became obvious — crystallised by the story of a cancer patient who could not get a surgery scheduled and by the time she did the cancer had become inoperable — Blair crashed on the issue of trust. "Blair and New Labour

were forever associated after that with being more spin than real," said Greenberg. Lesson: Be honest with the public early on when facing huge challenges. They will let you off the hook on a literal campaign promise — if you level with them early about the difficulties and how long it will take to see progress.

Ehud Barak became the prime minister of Israel in 1999, and a pillar of his campaign was that Jerusalem must remain Israel's eternal, undivided capital. Yet, at Camp David with President Clinton in 2000, Barak offered the Palestinians a division of Jerusalem. What was most striking, said Greenberg, was how readily the Israeli public accepted that shift.

"A position that six months earlier was completely off the table — dividing Jerusalem — was now on it," said Greenberg. Once the taboo against even hinting at dividing Jerusalem was broken, even Likud voters polled by Greenberg started asking: "Why should we be asked to give up the Palestinian neighborhoods?" Conventional wisdom just fell apart under the logic of it. Lesson: "Nothing," said Greenberg, "is off the table for a leader who wants to make a bold move" in the fundamental interest of the country.

Finally, Nelson Mandela. Four years after he became South Africa's president in 1994, "people were demoralised about the lack of change and felt that the African National Congress had betrayed its promise," said Greenberg. "It had failed to deliver housing and jobs, but had delivered a lot of corruption and was at risk of losing its moral authority."

That was hard for liberation movement leaders to swallow, but the humble citizens wanted their now remote leaders to acknowledge their plight. Lesson: Mandela was humble enough to say that he haven't brought enough change — that even he was disappointed — without threatening the ANC's claim to govern. "He began to tell a compelling story that explained why advances were slow, pointed to areas of progress and allowed people to be hopeful about future changes," said Greenberg.

The über-lesson for presidents? You can't be too honest in describing big problems, too bold in offering big solutions, too humble in dealing with big missteps, too forward in re-telling your story or too gutsy in speaking the previously unspeakable.

The New York Times

# Give the people what they want

As it ramps up infrastructure, JNNURM should not treat the urban poor as passive objects of policy



NITHYA RAMAN



**T**HE URBAN poor are not a small group: more than a quarter of India's urban population lives below the poverty line, according to a recent UN study. The streets, the composition of the workforce, and the economy all bear the imprint of their contributions to city life. Yet they are often invisible to policymakers, who plan for them and around them, but without ever consulting them. Could asking for their input before we make policies help our broken urban planning system work better?

Chennai attempted to do exactly this on February 14 when, for the first time in the city's history, the city's poorest workers, those in the informal sector, were officially consulted for a new plan for the city. More than 200 workers from the informal sector, including sanitation workers, domestic workers, construction workers, fisherpeople, street vendors, auto drivers and others, came together to discuss the City Development Plan, a plan that Chennai is writing in order to access funds under the central government's Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The new plan is supposed to outline a vision for Chennai and identify a series of infrastructure projects that will help the city to achieve its vision. A significant portion of JNNURM funding is designated to provide for the needs of the urban poor.

The consultation revealed that poor workers' needs and vision for the city require policy changes well beyond our current infrastructure-driven model of urban development. Indeed, their participation in the planning process teaches planners an important lesson: that urban development should aim higher than merely improving infrastructure. It should improve the quality of our lives.

The workers offered many valuable inputs that could easily be translated into infrastructure projects for the City Development Plan. Workers asked that evictions of slum-dwellers immediately cease, and that funds allocated for the urban poor be used to provide infrastructure, services and tenure in existing slum settlements rather than to construct alternative housing on the outskirts of the city. They asked for the government to prioritise the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and users of public transport over the needs of automobile and motorcycle owners. They also asked that the government designate spaces for them to work within the city, such as spaces in markets and on roadsides for street-vendors, and to provide them services like drinking water, toilets, and crèches in these work spaces. If such projects are included in

the new city development plan, it will already mark a significant departure from the city's traditional planning priorities.

However, a number of the things that they suggested had absolutely nothing to do with infrastructure or city development as conceived by the JNNURM, and yet, were central to workers' vision of a better city. Workers asked for access to finance and social security benefits and better quality, better-paid jobs. They wanted medical insurance, well-functioning welfare boards, and provisions for retirement benefits. They wanted access to low-interest loans, so that they could avoid usurious moneylenders. They wanted the police to stop harassing them at their workplaces. They also wanted the push towards privatising municipal services to end, because privatisation meant a decrease in the availability of formal sector, decently paid work.

Workers also demanded changes in the government's urban development policies that would give more power to citizens. They asked that the government provide complete information to city residents about all urban infrastructure projects. They also demanded that projects be approved through a genuinely consultative process, and that the final approvals for urban infrastructure projects should rest with local ward sabhas or gram sabhas. Why was this so central to their demands? Because urban infrastructure projects inevitably require government land, and result in the displacement of poor slum dwellers who squat on that land.

Broadly speaking, when asked to think about city development, informal sector workers responded with measures that would improve their own quality of life.

And maybe this is exactly the lesson that urban planners and the architects of the JNNURM should be taking from Chennai's informal sector workers. The JNNURM focuses narrowly on the provision of infrastructure in cities, but it does not make any clear links between the provision of this infrastructure and improvements in the quality of life of residents. Nor is it clear how the JNNURM will measure its effectiveness. So far, the only proof of the JNNURM's efficacy the government has offered residents is the amount of money spent, but it is unclear what good this money has done for residents, especially the city's poorest. Instead, a consultative planning process could be used to identify what kinds of improvements are needed for city residents, to create transparent benchmarks by which this improvement can be measured, and ways to monitor this improvement.

The persistence of significant levels of urban poverty even after rapid economic growth in the country is shameful. How we go about effectively addressing the needs of the urban poor can provide us valuable lessons for India's cities as a whole.

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# Is a feel-good fantasy out of Africa in good taste?

A new TV series set in Botswana prompts the same old 'Slumdog' reservations

JOSHUA ALSTON

**T**HE AFRICA in the new HBO television series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* isn't the one we're accustomed to seeing. There are no wailing babies with swollen bellies, no violent political uprisings and nary a haemorrhagic fever to be found. Based on the popular series of novels by Alexander McCall Smith, the show follows Precious Ramotswa (Jill Scott), a woman living in Botswana who uses her intuition to solve mysteries. In this Africa, the closest thing to a humanitarian crisis involves a woman named Happy Bapetsi and a man who may or may not be her father — or, as the situation is known within the agency, "The Case of the Dubious Daddy."

*Agency*, which debuts this month, is a feel-good series set in a place we're used to feeling bad about. Granted, Botswana has a lot going for it, compared with many developing countries. The country's government is democratic and stable, and its GDP is among the world's fastest-growing, thanks to its diamond wealth. However, about 25 per cent of adults in

Botswana are infected with HIV — the second-highest infection rate in the world. In McCall Smith's first novel in the series, from which the show's pilot is culled, there's almost no mention of the HIV epidemic, save for one coy statement from an ancillary character. McCall Smith has long had to defend his novels on these grounds, but the television adaptation of them, along with the debate surrounding this year's best picture, *Slumdog Millionaire*, reintroduces the question. Is it appropriate for an escapist fantasy to be set in a culture where so many people are suffering?

With *Slumdog*, much of the conversation hinged on the fact that both screenwriter Simon Beaufoy and director Danny Boyle are British — outsiders. McCall Smith is British too, as was the late Anthony Minghella, who helped bring *Agency* to the screen. But whereas *Slumdog* was accused of offering a fairy-tale so-

lution to Indian poverty, *Agency* will almost certainly be accused of ignoring Botswana's problems altogether. Both are wilful misrepresentations of the respective countries and cultures they are portraying. In fact, the absence of the typical dark-continent viewpoint was what attracted Minghella to the project. "It was a privilege to be working on a film which celebrates what we can learn from Africa, and not what we think we can teach it," Minghella said.

**Telling the story — the story of Precious, not the story of Botswana — in the most compelling way is the filmmakers' responsibility**

The lesson we can learn from Precious Ramotswa is much like the one we learned from Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky*: in the war that is life, there's no better weapon than an unwavering sense of optimism. Her father just passed away, and she's reeling from the dissolution of an abusive relationship, but she's irrepressibly sunny. The plotting is simplistic, the performances are over the top, but *Agency*

works in spite of it all. The show puts you into an adorable, heartwarming sleeper hit. It's less painful if you don't fight it.

With its industrious, joyful people and scenic backdrops, *Agency* is as much a tourism advertisement for Botswana as it is a TV show. But it's the right of the show's creators to project that vision of Botswana if they choose to. There are plenty of romantic fantasies set in America or England, and while they don't fully capture the countries in which they're set, that shouldn't be the goal of a fictional story. Telling the story — the story of Precious, not the story of Botswana — in the most compelling way is the filmmakers' responsibility.

*Agency*, like any other fictional story, should be judged on how skillfully it renders its world, not on the degree to which its world reflects reality. After all, the movies and television shows that have depicted Africa as a slide show of human suffering haven't shown the entire picture either. And if there are going to be escapist fantasies, there's no better place to set them than in countries where the people could use a little respite.

Newsweek

# India on the rise

In an editorial in the special issue of the *Organiser*, titled "Global Economic Crisis and India's Geopolitical Concerns," R Balasankar writes: "The world order seems distinctly moving towards multipolarity. This possibility was discounted for long. It is interesting that the evolution of this new universe of multiple poles began from the US which so far used every power at its command to keep the world uni-polar. The dramatic onslaught of deepening global economic crisis shattered the implicit faith in globalisation which the US and its allies promoted as a tool of diplomatic hegemony. Now the wave of protectionism, the anti-thesis of globalisation, has become a core philosophy with the West. The US is leading the charge. According to *Newsweek* (March 11 2009), as one of the most dramatic effects of global recession US which was the main destination of international migra-

tion to pursue a dream of better living has ceased to be so; rather the trend is even starting to reverse itself. Reports talk of at least six million job losses in that country in the last four months.

He adds: "How does India cope with the new situation? Has our geopolitical vulnerabilities increased in the last five years? Without undermining our economic growth and prosperity can we make a departure from past follies?... There is no dearth of literature in the wake of globalisation, mostly authored by western scholars, supportive of the new architecture of world economic order and their Indian chums predicting India's emergence as a major economic power by the end of the first half of this century. Emergent India as a world economic power but a poor second-rate strategic partner of the West. Indians will get part of the leftover jobs of the west, great Indian idols will be those whom the Americans will certify as great managers of BPOs,

# Organiser View from the RIGHT

imported US manual labour and second-rate software whiz kids."

He concludes: "Most western analysts have painted India both as a challenge and an opportunity to the US. India is a large and continental size country with advantages that no other country can claim. It is steadily developing technical and social organisational capacities. China, like Japan, is excessively dependent on the international market both for resources and revenue generation. The world recession will hit it harder and longer. This is likely to limit its ability to play the big challenge. Its self-created contradictions of market economy and command polity, according to many analysts, can stymie its high growth in the long term. This is where India stands out. We are only short of a visionary political class."

# Get real

In a piece titled "Indian policy choices in a hostile world," Gautam Sen writes: "Indian conceit about their supposed convivial pluralism and venerable cultural heritage misleads them into believing they are ineffably agreeable to others. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Muslims, a vast segment of the world's population, dismiss pagan Indians with withering contempt. Arabians view them as lowly menials, which is precisely the status of the vast majority abroad. Britain's elites harbour abiding animus towards Indian Hindus because they con-

tinued to blame them for their loss of imperial power and associated claims to elevated world status. In Europe, only France's elites, infamously surprising the Nazis by their eagerness to collaborate in dispatching their Jewish compatriots to concentration camp deaths, match them in anti-Hindu vitriol. Xenophobic Christian America is proudly ignorant and sees little real difference between their own former slaves and repugnant non-white Indian slumdogs. The Chinese harbour more racial malice even compared to the Japanese or Indians themselves and they remain malevolently poised to put India in its place once and for all. Pakistani jihadis incubate inborn hatred towards Indians despite mostly being Hindu converts to Islam themselves, held in low esteem by Arabs. India's two principal international friends are allied to it for essentially opportunistic reasons because that is the normal modus operandi of international relations."

He adds: "Indians need a harsh reality check to recognise these hard truths about themselves and how unifying the real world happens to be. India's domestic politics are the main barrier to the requisite clarity in thinking regarding the urgent tasks that lie ahead and earnest action in pursuing them. India's thoroughly fractured domestic politics constrains the emergence of a secure and self-confident governing class that is not permanently distracted by the cynical compromises necessary for attaining power. This political fracture has also made India's governing class both politicians and bureaucrats, vulnerable to foreign subordination that influences domestic political outcomes. India Gandhi was the only modern Indian leader with the personal courage to vigorously assert Indian interests against a formidable array of opponents that included the entire western alliance, China and the Islamic world."

Compiled by Suman K. Jha