

REVIEW

The MBC shines a light on the crisis

Last Wednesday night, the national broadcaster aired a programme exploring the State's additional stimulus package. It made for good viewing.

THE Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) is no stranger to controversy. It is used to coming under fire for the quality and, more importantly, the political bias of some of its shows. A lot of this opprobrium is directed at its daily news programmes, which resemble a ministerial parade. The national broadcaster does occasionally shrug off its straightjacket and fulfill its mandate of informing the public on the burning issues of the day. Wednesday night was one of those moments. On MBCTV1, a televised debate on the economic crisis and the government's stimulus package gave a lot of food for thought.

The hour-long programme's concept was simple enough: its success resided in the quality of the debate. The set was divided into two sections. On one side, sat a panel of experts and commentators and, on the other, representatives of various sectors of the economy. The panel consisted of the chairman of Enterprise Mauritius, Amédée Darga, the director of the Joint Economic Council, Raj Makoond, the chairman of Development Bank of Mauritius, Eric Ng, and the economist Pierre Dinan. The first two know the stimulus package intimately (Amédée Darga and Raj Makoond sit on several sub-committees established by the package) and were able to explain the finer points of its implementation.



■ The panel of experts convened by the MBC – (from left to right) Eric Ng, Amédée Darga, Raj Makoond and Pierre Dinan – to discuss the additional stimulus package.

Next to them, sat the representatives of the different sectors. The chairman of the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry and managing director of Star Knitwear group, Ahmed Parkar, spoke for the textile industry, while the chairman of the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority, Robert Desvieux, and the director of the Association of Hotel and Restaurant Owners of Maurice, Patrice Legris, did the same for the tourist industry. Finally, the chairman of Central Electricity Board (CEB), Patrick Assirvaden, gave an overview of the energy sector. The programme was also interspersed with reports on the performances of the textile, tourism and ICT sectors, to name but three.

Though no one sought to deny the gravity of the situation – export earnings are down by Rs 3 billion compared to last year – most speakers were relatively upbeat about the economy's prospects. Three main threads emerged from the programme. Firstly, most of the pan-

elists agreed on the fact that there are opportunities embedded in the crisis, in the sense that many of the country's competitors have been hit just as badly, if not worse, by its economic shockwaves. They warned, however, that not everyone will be able to capitalize on the situation. Only companies with solid foundations would be in a position to exploit the vacuum.

Emergence of good governance and ethics

Indeed, the tough circumstances, including a strong rupee and dwindling demand, will test the mettle of even the most resilient companies. Pierre Dinan described the situation as an opportunity to "think outside the box", while Raj Makoond went as far as calling for a "total reengineering" of the private sector.

The second recurring theme addressed the country's readiness to "bounce back" after the crisis. Although

the probable duration of the crisis was a moot point, most panelists agreed on the need for all stakeholders to prepare for the upswing that is bound to follow. Indeed, rather than allow the economy to be sapped of its vitality and dynamism, the public and private sectors should work together to ensure that the country emerges strengthened from these troubled times. For Raj Makoond, the stimulus package, via its public-private sub-committees, encourages this approach.

The third and final main threat concerned "bureaucratic bottlenecks" that often hinder the implementation of infrastructure projects. Amédée Darga described the start-up time of such projects as "extremely slow". The managing director of the Board of Investment, Raju Juddoo, outlined some of the measures that aim to streamline procedures and cut down on red tape. He pointed out, however, that certain laws need to be promulgated if this process is to be fully realized.

Amédée Darga also expressed satisfaction at what he perceives as an absence of finger pointing since the onset of the crisis. Indeed, he believes that the Mauritian population fully understands the nature of the situation, namely that it is the fruit of a series of external factors and that it has refrained from laying the blame at anyone's door. This mindset does indeed signal a break from the usual trend where the government is held responsible for each and every ill that befalls the nation.

If the programme had one shortcoming, it was the dearth of discussions on what the world economy will look like after the crisis, even if Pierre Dinan predicted the emergence of better governance and ethics. Despite this minor criticism, the MBC deserves plaudits for what was a highly informative programme. Hopefully, the national broadcaster will dish up more similarly stimulating audiovisual fare in the near future.

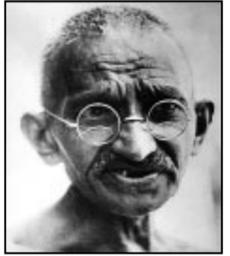
Nicholas RAINER

HERITAGE

Talks on to stop Gandhi auction in Washington

INDIA said yesterday it has asked its embassy in Washington to ensure that Mahatma Gandhi's belongings are brought back – either through the proposed auction or otherwise – to the country. The Delhi High Court has issued an injunction against the auction or sale of Gandhi's belongings.

However, faced with media speculation that not enough was being done to bring back Gandhi's belongings – which include his metal-rimmed glasses, pocket watch and sandals – the foreign ministry also stated that the Consulate General of India in New York has been in touch with Antiquorum Auctioneers, where the items are proposed to be auctioned, for the past several days. Government sources said that India had offered to buy the belongings at the reserve price but the auctioneers refused.



■ The Mahatma's belongings being auctioned in New York.

"We have asked our embassy in Washington and Consulate General in New York to do everything that is required through the bidding process or otherwise to acquire the father of the nation's personal assets for the country," said minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma.

California-based James Otis, who is currently in possession of the Gandhi memorabilia, had said that the Indian government had not contacted him but this was denied by the government. "The said Mr James Otis, who appears to be based in California, has been contacted by the Consulate General and has agreed to meet the Consul General of India in New York," said Vishnu Prakash, the official spokesperson.

Meanwhile, the great grandson of the Mahatma, Tushar Gandhi, has attacked Otis for saying that he would consider donating the articles to India if the government allocated funds amounting to 5% of India's GDP to the poor. By poor, as he said, he meant the kind of people shown in *Slumdog Millionaire*. "Does he think Indians are morons? Does he think we are so gullible that we can't look through the plainly selfish motives? First you put the things up for auction and then at the eleventh hour, you want to become a saint," said Tushar.

The good news for India is that some prominent Indians based in the US, including hotelier Sant Chatwal, have come together to bid for the items. Chatwal has told the media that they wouldn't mind spending \$300,000-400,000 for the articles which, as he said, they want to gift back to India.

MAHATMA GANDHI INSTITUTE

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