Snowbound China – 638 words

Megaphone apology

Feb 7th 2008
From *The Economist* print edition

It is good to hear a government apologise. But China's has much to be sorry about

THE last time anyone can remember a Chinese leader venturing, megaphone in hand, into a disgruntled crowd to offer an apology was in May 1989 when Zhao Ziyang visited Tiananmen Square to say sorry to students protesting there. The apology neither saved Mr Zhao's career nor prevented the army's advance on the square a few days later. But it seems to have impressed one man, at Mr Zhao's left shoulder in this famous photograph of the incident (see above). This year Wen Jiabao, now China's prime minister, has been mimicking his former boss. He dropped into railway stations where freezing crowds had waited for days to get home for the annual Chinese new year holiday. He used his megaphone to apologise for the disruption caused by the worst winter weather southern and central China have endured in at least five decades.

In China as anywhere else, when a politician apologises, he is usually saying "it is not my fault." Everyone loves to blame the government and some Chinese bloggers have been muttering about Hurricane Katrina. But even in China many people will have attributed this disaster to the "act of God" rather than a foul up by the Politburo.

All the same, in a one-party dictatorship, where power has traditionally meant never having to say you're sorry, Mr Wen's humility is a welcome nod towards accountability. It forms part of a broader awareness on the part of China's leaders of the discontented grumbling of those who feel left behind in the breakneck dash for growth. In speech after speech, Mr Wen and Hu Jintao, the party's boss and China's president, have promised to do more to bridge the widening gap between China's mostly urban rich and its mostly rural poor. That gap is inhabited by people like those suffering in the cramped, icy railway stations. Many have escaped rural penury in China's interior to work as migrants in the booming factories and building sites of the coastal belt. The annual lunar new year holiday represents their one chance to have a few days off, go home and see loved ones. No wonder Mr Wen was worried about their mood.

Out of control

Despite their professions of concern, however, Mr Wen and Mr Hu have done little in concrete policy terms to make them count. And there are some ways in which policy failures have indeed exacerbated the weather-induced agony. The first is the inadequacy of disaster-response mechanisms, and the poor co-ordination between the various government departments involved. Second is the refusal to tackle a basic structural problem: that China is a country with hundreds of millions of migrant workers, most of whom are separated from their families, who all take their holidays at exactly the same time. A reform to holiday entitlements is belatedly under way. Residency rules that force families apart also need reviewing.

Thirdly, at least one aspect of the latest crisis was both foreseeable and in part a direct result of government policy: the electricity shortages, which afflicted tens of millions and worsened the transport bottlenecks. A flawed reform had freed fuel prices but left power-producers unable to pass on the rising cost of coal to consumers, because electricity

prices are fixed. Many producers responded by letting their stocks fall to dangerously low levels, in the hope prices would fall when the weather warms up in the spring.

Little scares China's leaders as much as high rates of price inflation. And with food production and distribution both affected by the bad weather, they are likely to be tempted by further administrative price controls. But the lesson of the recent crisis is not that they are needed; it is that they do not work.