

## Well done, Mr. Kalam

**P**olitical parties, as is their wont, play political games, whether in a parliamentary or presidential election. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who distinguished himself as one of India's most popular Presidents during 2002-2007, seems to have been quick to sense the designs of self-serving politicians who were seeking to drag him into another presidential contest. With the ruling United Progressive Alliance announcing Pranab Mukherjee as its candidate, and the opposition National Democratic Alliance divided over forcing a fight, Mr. Kalam would have been staking his personal prestige and international reputation in a presidential bout without standing a realistic chance of winning. Often celebrated as the People's President during his years in office, Mr. Kalam enjoys the love and affection of countless youth in the country. The octogenarian bachelor is seen as a selfless patriot standing apart from the much-derided political class. In 2002, when he decided to contest, the political circumstances were markedly different: both the major political formations, the NDA and the Congress, were with him, and only the Left parties put up a token fight. Now, with Mr. Mukherjee getting the support of even the Samajwadi Party — whose leader, Mulayam Singh, was instrumental in first proposing Mr. Kalam's name in 2002 and floating his candidature this time around too — the presidential race is as good as over. The Left parties will decide on their stand on June 21, but no matter what, they would be averse to backing an NDA nominee even if it is Mr. Kalam.

Mr. Kalam would surely have realised he would be placing his own legacy under threat if he were to contest again. As a former President, he is taken seriously wherever he goes. On the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant issue, his views had a bearing on the broader public opinion, even if not on the local populace. If West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the BJP wanted him as President, it was only to serve their respective political ends. The BJP will do anything to embarrass the Congress, and Ms Banerjee will stop at nothing to stay in the spotlight and project herself as the prime mover of all things. To his credit, Mr. Kalam was able to see through the motives of his supposed backers, and resist the temptation to enter the fray. In 2007, when there was a similar move to make him contest again, he had rightly stepped back as he did not want to involve Rashtrapati Bhavan in any political process. Five years on, Mr. Kalam's statesmanship, vision and sense of his own legacy remain undiminished.