

What Paul Martin can teach Gordon Brown

Moving from dauphin to leading light after a long run in power has bested many a politician, say Matt Browne and Tim Murphy

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It is a hellish task and it almost never works.

The challenge of moving from dauphin to leading light after a long run in power has bested many a great politician in the modern era. The story has played out most recently in Canada, where Paul Martin took over from Jean Chrétien, and in the U.S., where Al Gore tried to succeed Bill Clinton.

Many falter and few survive for long. This is the frightening storyline that faces Gordon Brown and New Labour following Tony Blair's announcement last week that he will leave office at the end of June.

The basic premise is the same: A long-serving successful leader whose charisma and talent have held off all political challenges is giving way to an ambitious successor who has co-authored those achievements. The weight of governing and the accumulated injuries of 10 years in power start to break through. Voters get a thirst for change and begin to think maybe they want more.

Mr. Brown has the mixed fortune of learning some of these lessons before he takes office. The sky-high expectations that made solid governing seem somehow disappointing for Mr. Martin have already crashed for Mr. Brown. His position in the polls is less impressive than Mr. Martin's was; as a Scot, he will have taken Labour's defeat in the recent Scottish elections very seriously. The threat of the British Conservative Party also appears more real than Stephen Harper's challenge did, and divisions over Iraq and the cash-for-honours scandal are all too evident.

In this context, the first dilemma facing Mr. Brown is how to balance continuity and change. He must capture the mood for change, which will almost invariably involve distancing himself from the past, while not angering those who think the party's success will be built on more of the same. Equally, he must generate new ideas and a new policy agenda, but one that is not met with the cynicism of the media and a public who will ask why this wasn't done before.

Mr. Martin found this tough going. On the policy front, the media thought his new ideas weren't revolutionary enough, while his changing of the guard got caught up in the twin critique of punishing the old guard, without having enough fresh faces.

Mr. Brown may face less of a policy challenge from within as he is seen as a more traditional or orthodox Labour figure. Unlike Mr. Martin, however, he will have to manage the tension between this perception, his actual beliefs and the need to create a new coalition capable of speaking to the aspiring voters of middle England.

Mr. Brown may also have an advantage over Mr. Martin. The past few years of Mr. Blair's leadership have been plagued by broad opposition to key policies personally associated with the Prime Minister - most prominently, the war in Iraq and education. In addition, policy discussions have stagnated, so new policies and a change of direction may be welcomed.

For his part, Mr. Martin had to look on as prime minister Jean Chrétien used his last 18 months to launch any number of new initiatives - such as Kyoto and gay marriage - which his successor had to complete or finesse.

As for new faces, Mr. Brown's challenge is much like Mr. Martin's: How can Mr. Brown embrace Blairites to avoid further factional infighting, while rewarding his own team and presenting a new face to the country? Here, Mr. Martin's experience would suggest that one or two key figures of the prominent old guard should be embraced to help create, at the very least, the image of a united front. David Miliband's decision not to run against Mr. Brown as the Blairite "candidate of choice" has spared Labour the trauma of a divisive leadership battle. Expect him to play a prominent role both in the next government and in the years to come.

The final lesson centres on leadership. Both Mr. Blair and Mr. Chrétien had strong public personas that connected with voters and allowed them to withstand challenges and failures that would have ended anyone else's political career. Those skills take time to build and Mr. Martin didn't, and Mr. Brown won't, have much time to make mistakes.

The lesson here is the most important of all: Define who you are early and stick with it.

Mr. Martin's enthusiasm for policy and ideas and his willingness to listen was quickly characterized as a failure of leadership by analysts. It stuck. Mr. Brown should quickly carve out two or three areas that are core to what he wants to do and be unbending in pursuing them. He doesn't have Tony Blair's touch and never will; but if he can learn from the lessons of Canada's Liberal Party and define his own path and style, Gordon Brown may do what few

politicians in his shoes have done - build his own legacy on the foundations of his predecessor.

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