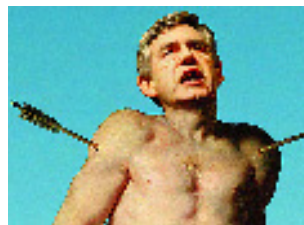


# The agony of Gordon Brown

Britain's prime minister is paying sorely for his mistakes. Is he doomed?



WOULD the Labour Party really consider foisting a second unelected prime minister on Britain? Apparently so. Less than a year after Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair, the idea of installing a third front man has become think-

able for some of his erstwhile supporters. That it has come to this reflects the astonishing speed of Mr Brown's fall.

Last summer, when the prime minister handled a series of minor crises reasonably competently, he seemed able to turn floodwaters into wine. His long, scheming wait for the top job appeared to have been triumphantly vindicated. Yet in the local elections on May 1st, Labour recorded its worst result in living memory, including the loss of London's mayoralty to the Conservatives. Mr Brown's personal rating has plunged even more violently. His apotheosis, it now seems, has led only to agony. As a result, some Labour MPs are conducting a campaign against him that is likely to damage not only their leader but also their party's chances of re-election.

## The fall

It isn't all his fault. Mr Brown is in part the victim of one of the basic laws of politics: gravity. Assuming the premiership after Mr Blair's decade in office, he also inherited an electorate that had grown bored and increasingly hostile to Labour. He was bequeathed a messy party-funding scandal and a Tory opposition under new and (finally) competent management: David Cameron has stolen many of New Labour's ideas (see page 50). Nor is it Mr Brown's fault that his succession was followed by a dip in the impressively consistent economic growth over which, as chancellor, he presided, and by biting rises in the price of energy and food over which he has little control.

But Mr Brown is responsible for most of what has gone wrong for him. The collapse of Northern Rock is symptomatic of his basic problem: that Labour has been in power long enough for its mistakes to catch up with it. As chancellor, he introduced a badly designed regulation system, with the result that nobody was really in charge of overseeing the banks when the credit crunch hit. He frittered away cash, with the result that the government is going into an economic downturn short of it. He undermined Mr Blair's public-service reforms, with the result that the government has failed to deliver improvements in education and the health service sharp enough to meet voters' rising expectations. He meddled continually with business, with the result that the private sector is howling about red tape. He fiddled with the tax system, including abolishing a tax band designed to help poor people—a change that has ignited a row in his party that he is battling to defuse.

Mr Brown's character does not help. His new job requires a set of traits—ruthlessness, boldness, a malleable charisma, decisiveness—that might not be attractive in a friend but are necessary in a leader. His leadership defects were especially exposed during the hinge of his premiership thus far: the weeks last autumn when he considered holding a general election.

The game-playing exposed Mr Brown's efforts to appear ecumenical—the great Tory-hater taking tea with Lady Thatcher, for instance—as so much cynical manipulation. Worst of all was his behaviour after he pulled back. He first comically denied that opinion polls had affected his decision, then overhastily emulated a crowd-pleasing Tory tax proposal, leaving an enduring impression of intellectual surrender.

That sorry episode unleashed another near-unstoppable political force: momentum. All political news is now interpreted through the refractive lens of Mr Brown's failings. His few good ideas go unrecognised; unrelated mishaps congeal into a narrative of defeat. The Tories, meanwhile, are soaring in the opposite direction. Their momentum is scaring Labour MPs, who made Mr Brown their leader without demur, into distancing themselves from him or embracing outright defeatism—a panicked fickleness that serves only to dig their collective hole deeper.

Can Mr Brown reverse the dynamics? He has been offered no shortage of advice from his party. Turn left, say those who never much cared for the New in New Labour, and in his weakness see a chance to ditch it. Smile more, say others—though when Mr Brown tries to speak human he seems less convincing than when he sticks to macroeconomics. There are a few who, despite the risk of looking chaotically undemocratic, simply enjoin him to go: over half the Labour supporters in a *Populus* poll for the *Times* want him out.

Mr Brown can scarcely complain about disloyalty, for he helped to inculcate a taste for plots and mutinies during his long march to Downing Street. But would his removal improve things? From the Labour Party's point of view, there are too many flimsy contenders to replace him and scarcely any serious ones. The struggle to get rid of a leader causes lasting damage—as the Tories, who only recently recovered from the civil war unleashed by the ouster of Lady Thatcher, know well. Besides, the Tories need a huge swing to form a government at the next election, probably in 2010. They are still planning for a hung parliament. Scandal, or an eruption of atavistic, Conservatism may yet weaken Mr Cameron. The new mayor of London, Boris Johnson, now an icon of Tory resurgence, may embarrass his party (see page 41).

## Too early for an execution

From the country's viewpoint, it is even harder to see why Mr Brown needs the *coup de grâce* just yet. Britain is not being overtly misgoverned, and nobody else in Labour is promising anything radically different. And Mr Brown may yet improve. To do so, he needs to articulate his basic political creed—essentially a meritocracy leavened with egalitarianism—better than he has managed to do so far. And, from this newspaper's point of view, he needs to commit unequivocally to the course of public-service reform eventually set by Mr Blair, then pursue it with dogged competence.

If he does this, especially if the economy recovers, he will have a chance against the Tories. Otherwise, he will go down in history as the worst sort of political failure: the sort who schemes to get a job and then has no idea what to do with it. ■