

The odd couple

How Gordon Brown and Barack Obama can and cannot help each other.



Illustration by Steve O'Brien

They dressed almost identically. But the demeanours of Gordon Brown and Barack Obama in the Oval Office on March 3rd were very different. Mr Obama was fluid in his gestures and congenial in his repartee. Mr Brown was grave and jerky (though much happier than when he stiffly met George Bush in 2007). "I hear you gotta game," Mr Obama quipped when the prime minister challenged him to a tennis match. But it was hard to imagine the older, jowlier man smashing the lithe younger one.

The age gap matters. It is only 11 years—58 to 47—but it separates a generation born in the aftermath of the second world war, and brought up during the cold war, from one that reached political maturity as history ended, then started again. It is a gap that divides a cadre of centre-left politicians who learnt to love the market and cherish the Atlantic alliance from its less dogmatic successor. Meeting Mr Brown, the president implicitly rebuffed speculation that his roots in colonial Kenya had soured his view of Britain and murmurs about the symbolism of removing a Churchill bust from his office. He said the "special relationship" was "a link and bond...that will not break". But this American embrace felt more businesslike than visceral.

And Mr Obama is new as well as youngish. In 2000, when he failed to get a pass for the Democratic convention, Mr Brown had been chancellor of the exchequer for three years. When they were asked about the mistakes that led to the financial turmoil, Mr Obama's denunciation was scathing; Mr Brown felt able to offer only limited and defensive regrets. This is the vital luxury enjoyed by the neophyte leader. (Mr Obama was, however, conciliatory about another mess that Mr Brown is unable to disown: Iraq. He said Britain's loyalty over Iraq would "never be forgotten", allaying worries that a mission designed partly to cement the alliance might end up weakening it.)

Yet despite those diverging biographies, the talk about shared values was more than mere diplomatic guff. The two bookish men are in some ways as ideologically close as any such pair have been for decades. In his emphasis on using the state as a motor of renewal, not least in health care, Mr Obama sometimes sounds like a mid-1990s New Labourite. Mr Brown is familiar with most of the president's economic team. They agree on the broad outlines of many anti-crisis policies.

And they are both in a hurry. Mr Brown faces a general election next year that he seems doomed to lose. Mr Obama is in a rush of his own: to act before his domestic popularity wanes and his global stock falls. He obviously cherishes Mr Brown much less than vice versa; but in assorted ways—in Afghanistan, in ameliorating the crisis—the prime minister can be useful to him.

The question is what this odd but oddly complementary couple might realistically achieve: for the world, and for Mr Brown's political prospects.

Ask not what you can do for Obama

There may be another way, besides Mr Obama's ancestry, in which the contemporary "special relationship" is tinged by the legacy of empire. Mr Brown, like many British leaders, has big ambitions—the sort of grand prime-ministerial aspiration that may be an unconscious grasp after Britain's lost, imperial, superpower status. He says he wants a "global New Deal" that will stretch "from the villages of Africa to reforming the financial institutions of London and New York", rhetoric that is eerily reminiscent of Tony Blair's yen to reach "from the deserts of northern Africa to the slums of Gaza" and beyond. Economically rather than militarily, Mr Brown wants to change the world. And like other prime ministers with such plans, he knows he can only manage it alongside America.

Mr Obama is less grandiose in his terminology, and is betting much less on the outcome of the G20 summit in London in April. But he endorsed Mr Brown's plea for other countries to give coordinated fiscal boosts, and for financial regulation to be revamped. Achieving that, and perhaps rebooting the International Monetary Fund, may not quite amount to saving the world; but it would be a start. The roles of the Bush era seem set to be partly reversed: where Mr Blair mongered Mr Bush's wars, it will be Mr Obama who sells financial reform to a fractious international community (though he will plainly sell nothing unless he thinks it in America's interests).

So there are modest grounds for hope that, with others, Mr Brown and Mr Obama might accomplish something. On the other hand, despite the president's controlled warmth—not ungenerous, considering Mr Brown's short political life-expectancy, and his lack of the renown that Margaret Thatcher and Mr Blair enjoyed in America—it seems unlikely that the Washington trip will deliver the transfusion of political momentum that Downing Street wanted and needs.

There was another diplomatic set on March 4th, when Mr Brown addressed a joint session of Congress. Like the summons to visit Mr Obama before other European leaders, it was a gratifying honour, bestowed on only four of his predecessors. His lavish praise of America (to say nothing of the honorary knighthood for Senator Edward Kennedy) won, at Bagehot's count, 19 standing ovations. Some in the audience were less ecstatic when he relayed his old opposition to protectionism and his new scepticism about unfettered capitalism. But Mr Brown beamed like a baby. It was his most hyped performance since his job-saving turn at last year's Labour Party conference, and like that one it was good, if gushy. Yet the mood at home is almost certainly too angry, the outlook too bleak, the cabinet too quarrelsome, for rousing paeans, Obaman stardust and the sheen of statesmanship to salve.

The Economist, New York, 5 mar. 2009, Britain, online. Disponível em <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 13 mar. 2009.