

Voters, meet Gordon

Britain's prime minister produces a great political blunder.



"THAT was a disaster," said Gordon Brown after an encounter with a voter that had not gone according to the script on Wednesday April 28th. In fact the incident was nothing compared with his accidentally keeping a broadcast microphone attached to his lapel which picked up that remark, and the rest of a conversation with his aides, as they retreated to Mr Brown's Jaguar. "They should never have put me with that woman," he added out of the corner of his mouth, smiling and waving to the crowd all the while. "Whose idea was that?" The kicker came after Mr Brown and his team drove away: "she was just a sort of bigoted woman that said she used to be Labour."

Insulting women of pensionable age behind their backs is a poor strategy on the campaign trail. Mr Brown's remark is likely to do him even more damage than Barack Obama's slight to small-town America at a fundraiser during the Democratic primary race. Mr Brown has neither Mr Obama's charm, nor the excuse that he was making a reasonable point in a rather crass way. To make things even worse, Gillian Duffy, a former council employee from Rochdale and the object of Mr Brown's remark, would appear to be a walking archetype of Labour's core vote.

British voters are, on the whole, tolerant of their politicians' bloopers. John Major, a former prime minister was forgiven for describing many of his fellow Conservative MPs as "bastards", partly because so many people agreed with him (though he went on to lose the election in 1997). John Prescott, a former deputy prime-minister, was pardoned for responding with a left jab when a voter threw an egg at him in the 2001 election.

Both of these incidents confirmed voters' impressions of the perpetrators. Mr Major was so polite and ineffectual that he considered even fairly mild swearing to be a transgression. Mr Prescott's punch reminded voters that he was irascible and unreconstructed. The danger for Mr Brown is that his remark also confirms what people think they know about him: that he does not have much contact with people outside his inner circle; that he is unused to people disagreeing with him; and that he smiles and waves at voters while thinking "get me out of here."

Judging by his reaction, Mr Brown knows this is the case. He went on a radio programme to apologise to Mrs Duffy and hung his head in his hands while the recording was played back to him. Mr Brown began his atonement by spending more than half an hour with Mrs Duffy,

during which he apologised for saying something so stupid and said that he had misunderstood the point that she had made to him earlier.

Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's former strategist, said Mr Brown, "was angry less about the obvious frenzy he had unleashed than the fact that he said what he did." This has the ring of truth: for all his faults Mr Brown is not a bad man but rather a tired one, running an arduous campaign from an uncomfortable position as both incumbent and underdog. Unfortunately for Labour voters seldom take such things into account.

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