

The last days of Gordon Brown

Uncomfortable as they seem, they may turn out to be the prime minister's happiest for a while.



IT HAS been commonplace, for much of Gordon Brown's premiership, to compare him to Hamlet: a man discomforted by action, beset by crippling indecision. For much of the election campaign—at least until his fateful visit to Rochdale on April 28th—he resembled Hamlet in another guise: the protagonist who keeps being ousted from his own drama, forced to look on unnoticed as younger, thrusting men commandeer the stage. Hamlet has Laertes and Fortinbras. Mr Brown has Nick Clegg.

This ought to have been his fight: his great struggle to secure a gravity-defying fourth term for Labour and an unprecedented mandate for himself. But Mr Brown has often seemed to be relegated to the action's margin, more Rosencrantz than a hero. The apparent thwarting of David Cameron's push for a Tory majority; the amazing rise of Mr Clegg's Liberal Democrats: these have been the dominant narratives. The incumbent's battle for survival has often struggled to get a look in.

As soon as "change" became the big theme, attention naturally tended to wander from Mr Brown. But his marginalisation is also a result of Labour strategy. When he launched the campaign, standing in Downing Street with his cabinet, it seemed sensible for him to play up the strength, or at least recognisability, of his team, in implicit contrast to the lack of talent on the Tory front bench. In practice, his plan of making low-key visits to tame supporters, while Lord Mandelson and others minded the shop in London, has left a void where the photo ops should have been.

Then came Rochdale. This week Labour decided to change its tactics, and expose Mr Brown to the slings and arrows of outraged voters. In Rochdale he was caught by a stray microphone calling one of them "bigoted" in the apparent safety of his car, a remark preceded, on the tape, by the distinct thud of something hitting something else. His reputation for aloofness and covert intolerance was devastatingly, if somewhat unfairly (most of us are rude about other people in private), confirmed. That the voter was a widow and hitherto a Labour supporter only made it worse. Truth be told, this calamitous slip was the first time Mr Brown has made much of an impact on the campaign.

That includes his performances in the televised debates. More than anyone anticipated, the election has been shaped by them. Some people—mostly Tories who expected Mr Cameron to dominate them—now argue that they are a flighty basis for voting decisions. Bagehot's view is that they are at least as good a motive as many others, such as whim and inherited prejudice. But they do reward fluency and charm. Mr Brown lost the first two, the post-match analysis mostly focusing on the contest between his rivals (the third is on April 29th, after *The Economist* goes to press).

Not long ago it seemed that Labour might almost manage a majority on May 6th. Now, for reasons both within Mr Brown's control and beyond them, words such as "implosion" and "annihilation" are again being murmured about its prospects. Polls suggest that Mr Brown could lead Labour to its first third-place finish in the popular vote since 1910. Senior figures in the party refuse to believe that the Lib Dems could come second. They scoff at bellicose Tory talk of taking Labour seats once considered safe. But even if Labour avoids a 1910-scale humiliation, it may well record its worst result since 1983.

And then, for poor Mr Brown himself, things could get worse.

Get it while you can

What happens in the event of a hung parliament depends, of course, on the precise arithmetic of the result. But it is still more likely than not that Mr Cameron will be the next prime minister. It is conceivable that, if he falls well short of a majority, he will co-operate, one way or another, with the Lib Dems. Mr Cameron's opposition to electoral reform, shared by the bulk of his party, may look like a deal-breaker. But what if his choice is governing now with Mr Clegg's help, or governing never? A passing acquaintance with the history of the Tory party, littered as it is with intellectual U-turns (not least Disraeli's dramatic reversal on voting reform), suggest that some sort of minimal deal is possible, despite the current asseverations of Tory MPs.

For his part, Mr Clegg has got himself into a bit of a muddle over what his bottom and red lines would be in post-election negotiations—first suggesting that he wouldn't help to keep Mr Brown in office (at least if Labour comes third in the popular vote), then seeming more equivocal. The muddle is understandable, deriving as it does from two competing imperatives. The first is Mr Clegg's desire not to compromise his bargaining power by limiting his options in advance; the second his need to distance himself from Mr Brown. Mr Clegg knows that, for a tribune of "change", propping up the old king, or seeming ready to, could be devastating. Thus there has been a last-gasp resurgence of Labour chatter about replacing Mr Brown with a more palatable, less tribal leader, if that would keep the party in office in a coalition—wildly undemocratic though such a switch would look.

So, at the moment, the safest-looking bet for PM may be on "anyone but Gordon". And if he goes, rejected by the voters, his party, Mr Clegg, or all three, the suppressed animosities and grudges he has incited will begin to be aired. Before long, his former ministers will produce their hastily cobbled together memoirs. Then shall we, like the denizens of Elsinore, hear of unnatural acts, accidental judgments, casual political slaughters and purposes mistook, which fell on the inventors' heads.

This, as some close to him note, was Mr Brown's chance to cast off the complexes accumulated during his long wait to become prime minister, and the ones added by humiliations since. That now looks improbable. All the same, Mr Brown's last, overshadowed days in power may be his sunniest for a while.

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