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Martin begins to learn his lesson

Signs that this Martin government will be different

JAMES TRAVERS

It is a sacred rite of political passage that new regimes are expected to point accusatory fingers at their predecessors for anything and everything unpleasant. Known formally as a transition and informally as a honeymoon, that innocent interregnum between past and present gives administrations the time and room they need to find their feet, set a course and begin to govern.

That's not a luxury Paul Martin and his minority government enjoy. With fall and a new session of Parliament fast approaching, this Prime Minister and this Liberal party have no one to blame but themselves.

Having made a horrible hash of passing the torch from Jean Chrétien to Martin, and after narrowly escaping what would have been a humiliating election defeat, Liberals must now get on with the job of recreating themselves and fulfilling national expectations swelled by election promises. Equally daunting, they must do it without the margin of error that comes with a majority and without the forgiveness allowed to new governments fixing someone else's problems.

All that suggests the second iteration of Martin's government will be markedly different from the first. Energy will replace indolence, innovative legislation will pump through Parliament's occluded arteries and the milestones will flash past at light speed as the government hurtles toward its destination of transformational change.

Well, up to a point.

There's no doubt Martin and Associates know they will have to perform on a much higher level. They are keenly aware — although they don't entirely agree — that most Canadians consider the first few months in office a disappointment and now need results to be convinced that this particular former shipping tycoon isn't an empty vessel.

But the phase-two Martin government isn't in any rush. It's counting on the political theatre a fissured Parliament will surely deliver to preoccupy the media and public while a new cabinet chips away at the Prime Minister's priorities.

That sounds — and is — a lot like the old carnival shell game: While the punters and rubes are mesmerized by all that frenetic movement, the elusive prize pea is kept out of harm's way.

In this case, harm is the defeat of a government that for the first time since 1993 isn't entirely master of its own destiny. Liberals desperately want to avoid that long enough to make progress on those issues that helped them win the June election.

Before voters trek again to polling stations in, say, 18 months, the ruling party needs to be able to put credible checkmarks beside a long-term fix for health care, an expanded national day-care program and a new deal for cities that recognizes their rising power and needs. They also want to take advantage of the political climate to advance an environment file that is increasingly seen here as a public policy common denominator.

Cynics will quickly note that in all this there is much of a muchness.

Martin's strength is connecting Canadians to bold concepts; his weakness is failing to match action to rhetoric. So, simply talking about progress while pushing its delivery further into the future is hardly a compelling post-election response from a government and a Prime Minister who promised so much only to deliver so little.

Needed now are some of those confidence-building measures that gradually, sometimes almost imperceptibly, introduce movement to stasis. Martin missed many of those opportunities last winter when he allowed scandal and election fever to seize and reshape an agenda that didn't reflect the revolutionary zeal he said would rattle the national capital to its complacent core. But with a rare second chance in hand, the Prime Minister is starting to drop hints that lessons have been learned and that things will be different.

Among the most important of those is the quiet decision to leave in place Alex Himelfarb, the powerful Clerk of the Privy Council and the country's top civil servant.

Tainted by his appointment by Chrétien and distanced from the Martinites by history, leftist leanings and working methods, Himelfarb was destined to seek other opportunities. Instead, he is masterminding the critical health-care strategy while serving as the bridge between the Prime Minister's Office and senior mandarins left bruised and resentful by clumsy attempts to drive admittedly overdue civil service reforms.

Keeping Himelfarb makes sense. He is smart, a strategic thinker and one of too few people in government who shares Martin's fascination with ideas. He is also the best available person for a pivotal post and, equally important, will personify Martin's sudden acceptance that he and those who rose to power with him don't necessarily have every answer.

That's critically important for an inner circle fairly accused of concentrating power at the centre while treating its ministers and mandarins as well as the media with arrogant disdain. Despite some signals that not all that much is changing — the powerful Prime Minister's Office remains deeply involved in naming key ministerial staff — the official plan is to give cabinet ministers more room to be creative, keep Martin from dominating every issue and to plug leaks that often made the administration seem like a sieve.

How well all that will work remains to be seen. Still, it's encouraging that one Liberal government morphing into another — a Liberal government with no one else to blame — is finally recognizing some of the blemishes it sees in the mirror.

Better late than never, the Prime Minister is slowly grasping that the enemy is within the walls and it is from there that rescue must come.

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