Bagehot

Midwinter madness

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The old lessons of the latest push to get rid of Gordon Brown

AS THE snows whirled around Westminster, its denizens were enveloped in blinding uncertainty. Just as the blizzard reached maximum intensity, Gordon Brown's government was engulfed in…The meteorological analogies were hard to resist on January 6th, when the latest bid to oust the prime minister was launched amid a white-out. Before long, however, the episode began to look less apocalyptic than it had momentarily seemed. And in place of upheaval, it offered the same basic lessons as the previous attempted coups that Mr Brown has seen off.

This time the main conspirators were Geoff Hoon and Patricia Hewitt, two former cabinet ministers. In a letter to fellow Labour MPs, they described the party as "deeply divided over the question of the leadership". This problem, they argued with hilarious hypocrisy, "is allowing our opponents to portray us as dispirited and disunited". They advocated a secret ballot of their number to resolve it: "Strong supporters of the prime minister should have no difficulty in backing this approach," they innocently wrote.

Ms Hewitt is regarded as a Blairite and is leaving Parliament. Mr Hoon, once Mr Brown's chief whip, was tarnished by both the expenses scandal and his role as defence secretary during and after the Iraq war. Only a few predictable malcontents publicly backed them. The insurgents were more numerous in the abortive putsch of 2008 and weightier in June 2009, when James Purnell quit as welfare secretary and called on Mr Brown to go too. Ms Hewitt's and Mr Hoon's aim may have been to catalyse more resignations from the cabinet: up to six of its members were later rumoured to be secret sympathisers. Instead the ministers gradually ventured into the snow to back Mr Brown.

So Mr Brown looked safe (until the general election) and the plot doomed. But it demonstrated again that, as a tribe, the Labour Party is dysfunctional and introverted.

The timing was astounding. On January 4th the election campaign was unofficially launched. At lunchtime on the 6th, Mr Brown put in a decent turn at prime minister's questions. Then the letter emerged. Though Ms Hewitt and Mr Hoon cite the imminent election as their motive, it in fact makes the idea of installing a new prime minister (the unspoken goal) little short of mad. He or she would have only a few weeks to govern before going to the country. Supporters of the plan thought the new leader might at least get a hearing from voters, and could reduce the scale of Labour's defeat. But to the world beyond Westminster, a ten-minute prime minister would surely seem a transparent and absurd ruse.

Previous bouts of unrest have likewise suggested a worrying divorce from reality. In 2008 and 2009, timing was also a problem for the plotters: because of the financial crisis, and because many feared that a new prime minister, the third in a single parliamentary term, would be obliged to call an early-ish election. If this week was too late, those occasions seemed, to some, too early. But there was another big problem too: deciding who would take over if Mr Brown got the push. A

few of the names that circulated suggested an astonishing insularity among Labour MPs and activists, some of whom seemed to think the party could merrily thrust even a virtual unknown into Downing Street.

Of course, there is a good reason why Labour keeps plunging back into this regicidal trauma. Being prime minister is a very difficult job, and Mr Brown has not been terribly good at it, especially the parts of it that tend to win elections. Even many of the cabinet ministers who rallied, sort of, to support him this week were less than effusive in their backing. Alan Johnson, the home secretary and man perhaps most likely to replace Mr Brown if he fell under a snow plough, was generous. But several other senior ministers seemed to be competing to issue the most tepid endorsement. David Miliband, the foreign secretary and another leadership contender, was notably tardy, as if keen to make it clear it was not he who was saving Mr Brown's skin. Mr Miliband's eventual statement said he "support[ed] the re-election campaign for a Labour government that [Mr Brown] is leading."

So the line, as it was last summer, is that "Mr Brown is the best prime minister we've got". Mr Miliband and the rest may not have jumped, but this lukewarm support is almost as extraordinary as rebellion. Four months (probably) before the election, senior members of Mr Brown's government seem to be more interested in managing their reputations within the Labour Party than in projecting a sense of unity. The Tories would have been pleased to see Labour plunged into a last-gasp leadership struggle. But they will doubtless settle for this.

As it happens, Labour MPs did have a chance to choose a different leader—in 2007, when Mr Brown took over without a contest. But most of the parliamentary cadre were too mesmerised by his mystique and too intimidated by his supporters to force one. Too few considered what the public might think.

The coming avalanche

Thus, in the end, there has been nothing much new in the midwinter plot. It confirmed that the Labour Party is home to the world's most inept conspirators. And it restated what Mr Brown's premiership had already amply proved: that he is more tenacious than his enemies but unable quite to quell them; that the party is hopelessly beset by in-fighting, and has never managed to escape the old rancour between Tony Blair, Mr Brown and their supporters; that it is unable to see itself as the rest of the country sees it.

Dying is an art. For governments, as for people, the end can offer a partial redemption, helping to define their reputations. It is almost inevitable that Labour will lose the coming election, but it could have gone down to an orderly and disciplined defeat. Instead, the end of its time in office is set to be as fractious and chaotic as the past few years. That is how it will be remembered.