

BAD SMILE ASIDE, PAUL MARTIN IS NOW SHINING

David OBrien - February 26, 2009

Everything might be different, if only he knew how to smile.

Former prime minister Paul Martin was in Winnipeg Tuesday to promote an aboriginal education program he started when he was forcibly retired from office three years ago.

A photo of his meeting with native teenagers at Children of the Earth School was dutifully published in the Free Press and everything looked great, except for that awful smile, the one that just doesn't work.

"No one in Canadian politics has a fake smile that looks near as fake as Paul Martin's fake smile," the National Post said back in the days when Martin was still trying to unseat his old boss, Jean Chrétien.

Sincerity, or the appearance of sincerity, in fact, has never been Martin's strong suit, which is a killer in politics. I was one of those who dismissed Martin as a phoney and a hypocrite when his minority Liberal government was defeated three years ago, but I realize today I was too harsh. Not about his smile, which isn't great, but about his commitment to public service, which is what really counts.

It's interesting and unfortunate that superficial qualities, such as a smile, can make the difference between success and failure, but then we've always known that appearance and image are everything.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, for example, has a pretty good smile, certainly better than Stéphane Dion's, but is there really as much substance to him as his image suggests? He may be a great intellectual, whatever that is, but some of us are still waiting for him to say something profound about Canada, with or without a smile.

As far as Martin is concerned, he could have retired to a tropical island and enjoyed his wealth when his political career ended. It would have been fashionable to take on some pet project, like the need for public art or something equally clean and trendy, the kind of endeavour that involves cocktail parties with interesting and clever people.

Instead, Martin, 71, chose one of the toughest portfolios possible -- aboriginal affairs, particularly the importance of ensuring that First Nations people graduate from high school and that they have an opportunity to become involved in the business community. The former prime minister didn't have to come to Winnipeg in the middle of a blizzard to demonstrate his commitment, but there he was in an inner-city school, where the chairs aren't comfortable and the food is plain and ordinary. There were no movie stars. Unfortunately, Martin was also smiling, but we've gotten over that.

"Aboriginal education is the key to progress and success" in Canada, he told reporters, explaining the rationale for committing his time and money to the programs he started.

For good or bad, Martin is also associated with the Kelowna Accord, which was to have invested \$5 billion over 10 years to improve aboriginal life in Canada if the Liberals had clung to power. The accord and his association with aboriginal issues during his political career were perceived by his critics cynically, as if being pro-Indian was somehow a winning strategy for anyone.

It's true aboriginals have some political clout, but only enough to elevate them above prison inmates as a constituency that garners a small measure of sympathy from Canadians. In fact, the idea that anyone would pander to aboriginals for their political muscle is preposterous. Penniless and scattered across the land in small, remote reserves, their power comes largely in the form of moral suasion and, for people like

Martin, in the realization that their success is tied to our own.

It's fair ball to question his policies and politics, but there should be no doubt that Martin was motivated by more than petty political ambition.

For whatever reason, Martin speaks today with a credibility and believability that eluded him as prime minister. It's as if he has finally found his true voice, if not his smile.