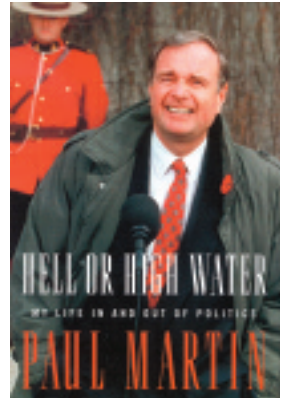


Paul Martin's version of history

Paul Martin. *Hell or High Water: My Life in and out of Politics*. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 2008.

Review by Anthony Wilson-Smith



To anyone who knows them, the surprise about the relationship between Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin isn't that it ended badly. Rather, it's that it worked so well, on so many levels, for so long. From the outset, the way they got along with each other, by Martin's description, "ran the gamut from cool to non-existent." It went further south in the 1990 Liberal leadership race, when they wanted the same prize. Their pursuit of it was further complicated by their differences over the Meech Lake constitutional accord. The race was, to paraphrase Hobbes, nasty, brutish — and relatively short, as Chrétien won handily. But for almost a decade after, they put aside their resentments, and benefited accordingly. Martin co-chaired the Liberal policy platform committee under Chrétien's watch. Then, in the wake of their resounding 1993 election victory, the two oversaw budgets and policies that gave the country its first federal surpluses in more than two decades.

The first participant to detail their personal rivalry was Eddie Goldenberg, Chrétien's long-time alter ego and regular emissary between the two camps. In his 2006 book, *The Way It Works*, he sliced and diced Martin for what he described as his disloyalty and back-room scheming. Then Chrétien, in his 2007 memoir, *My Years as Prime Minister*, went after any part of Martin's anatomy that Eddie missed.

Now comes Martin, with *Hell or High Water: My Life in and out of Politics*, in which — surprise ! — he puts a much different spin on events.

In ways both conscious and less so, Martin exposes his strengths and endearing qualities as well as the flaws that became apparent when he was prime minister. *Hell or High Water* is charming, self-deprecating and awash in passion for public policy, and, even as Martin's voice is clearly recognizable, it benefits from the clarity brought by veteran Ottawa hand Paul Adams. It's also revealing in its insights of what Martin understood about the practice of politics — as well as some rules of the trade that he never absorbed.

In nice ways, Martin has always been a mess of contradictions — a policy wonk who enjoys puttering away in mud-stained jeans and denim shirt on his farm; a multi-millionaire who includes fast-food joints among his dining favourites; a master networker who has one of the world's best Rolodexes, but who is just as content having policy debates with strangers who buttonhole him. And, lest we forgot, an overall happy warrior with a temper so explosive that aides in Finance used to refer to his flare-ups as "the Beatings" — though he forgave and forgot almost immediately.

But the book also makes clear why things went so wrong for Martin as

prime minister. How could a man who had been such a popular, successful finance minister manage, in the space of 26 months and two elections, to take the Liberal Party from the three majorities Chrétien had won into minority status after one election — and into a place in opposition in the next ?

There are several answers, starting with misguided priorities on both the personal and political fronts. The Liberals, after facing a badly divided opposition in three previous elections, underestimated the other side going into the 2004 vote. While Stephen Harper successfully knit two warring, disparate parties — the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives — into one united group, Martin's people were just as busily splitting their own party into two different factions.

They were far more interested in routing anyone who had been loyal to Chrétien than they were in preparing for an election they never doubted they could win. In recounting one reason why he was loath to give the supremely capable John Manley the finance portfolio, Martin writes: "Of course, John's very close association with Jean Chrétien in the latter years of his government meant that almost any differences between us on policy matters would play themselves out in the media as an extension of old battles now better forgotten." Manley left

politics. The irony, of course, is that if Jean Chrétien had used the same loyalty criteria, Martin's own political career would have been over shortly after it begun — without any cabinet position.

Martin was also unwilling to acknowledge that any of his inner circle could be anything less than the best and the brightest of stars. On that, you can make a case for, say, the indefatigable Terrie O'Leary and perhaps media guru Elly Alboim and tactician David Herle — all of whom played key roles through his successful years in Finance. (Martin, with hind-

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sight, correctly observes that relations between his camp and Chrétien's office were never as good after O'Leary took a job with the World Bank in 1998.) But overall, his bench strength wasn't nearly as good as he thought — and that weakness was compounded by the collective nastiness of his advisers. Like it or not, ruthlessness is an essential part of a leader's toolkit, because the people whose strengths at electoral politics helped get them into office aren't necessarily the ones best qualified to govern the country once they've arrived.

Martin seldom moved loyalists out of their jobs, even when things went badly. Yet many of those same people revelled in their bullying of perceived enemies — as many who were around Ottawa during his two years in power can attest.

Perhaps it's not surprising that Martin doesn't admit to major mistakes. Rather, his declining popularity through two elections was almost all, he suggests, because of Jean Chrétien. Chrétien (1) changed the

law governing election campaign contributions in a way detrimental to the Liberals, (2) chose to leave the release of the Auditor General's report on the Quebec sponsorship scandal until after he had left office (3) timed his own departure from office to be as inconvenient electorally as possible overall for Martin and (4) all of the above.

Perhaps, but he ignores his self-created problems. By Martin's telling, he was all about policy, while his opponents were interested only in partisan politics (thus missing the point that policy differences are at the

root of partisan politics, and that different political parties exist for that reason). "In the little more than two years I had as prime minister," he writes, "we made enormous headway on many of our most ambitious goals." And yet, voters, based on the 2006 result, evidently were underwhelmed. At another point, he writes that a pre-election speech he delivered in the fall of 2005 "was not to be a narrowly political exercise, but a roadmap for the public service." That speech, he writes, "prepared us for the election campaign I wanted to fight — but not the one I eventually did."

Therein lies another problem, because he makes that same claim about both elections he fought: when he took office in December 2003, "there was every reason to believe that the coming election would be fought on health care." But in both those campaigns, hard as it is to believe, those dang opposition parties — and, by extension, the general public — kept focusing on issues other than those that the Liberals laid in front of

them. For a man so genuinely interested in consultation, it's hard to understand what Martin didn't understand about that.

Those quibbles with both the book and Martin's record aren't small ones. But *Hell or High Water* also reminds us that his contributions far outweigh his failings. There aren't many other multi-millionaires prepared to give up their comfort and influence for the uncomfortable, uncertain life of an MP. Martin remains arguably Canada's greatest finance minister, and in post-electoral life, he's quietly kept his focus on Aboriginal issues and African aid. Leaving aside his feud with Chrétien, his friends far outnumber his enemies, and in his 18 years as an MP, Martin generally brought a cheeriness and enthusiasm to politics that aren't in as much abundance as they should be.

And, post-publication, Martin acknowledged recently that one of his few regrets is his fractious history with Chrétien, and the enduring damage their feud brought to the Liberals.

That's important, because the success of parties lies in understanding that the qualities that united them matter more than those issues that may divide. Stephen Harper got that, so he brought the right together and took it to power. The Liberals forgot — and suffered accordingly. Together, the 2004 and 2006 elections, along with the Martin and Chrétien books, are a reminder of what happens when you shrink your party's tent, rather than open it up. When the Liberals choose a new leader next spring, the person they choose and the campaign by which they do so will demonstrate whether they plan to learn from their recent history — or to simply repeat it.

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