

Paul Martin soon to show what he's really made of

Monday, November 17 2003 @ 02:00 PM MST

Contributed by: harrisp

Paul Martin soon to show what he's really made of

by Paul Harris

Bono, lead singer of the Irish rock group U2, is promising to be a big "[pain in the ass](#)" to Canada's new Prime Minister. In politics, promises are usually just whiffs of hot air floating on an ephemeral breeze; political promises usually have enough wiggle room for the politician to slither through, and they do slither. And the harsh reality of answering to the corporate interests who pull a politician's strings almost always means the public finds itself disappointed when the promises aren't kept. In the afterglow of a national political convention, this incoming Prime Minister is walking on air and the public seems eager to embrace him. But it is a safe bet that he will fail in his promises, and Bono will probably keep his.

Paul Martin will be installed as Canada's newest PM sometime over the next couple of months. Although Jean Chrétien has given February 2004 as the date of his retirement, few pundits believe he will hang around that long. Indeed, most of them appear to believe he should have been gone yesterday, even though the electorate doesn't seem to agree.

So where does Bono come into this story? Like a few others in the rock music business, Bono has a deep social conscience. He is a tireless campaigner for the needy of the world, especially those in Africa. Paul Martin was Canada's Minister of Finance for almost nine years and a few years ago he was buttonholed at a meeting of world leaders by Bono who urged him to make some concessions on Third World debt. I daresay Martin may have had no idea who Bono was before this meeting; they certainly come from different generations and would move in different circles.

But Bono's appeal reached Martin's heart, and he did make those concessions while urging his international counterparts to do the same. That led to contact between Bono and outgoing PM Chrétien who was urged to push an African agenda on his colleagues at the meeting of the eight largest industrialized nations known as the G8 Summit. And Chrétien did.

Bono has been heard to praise Canada and both its incoming and outgoing PMs. So when the political convention to select --- or crown --- Martin as the new leader finally arrived, Bono was invited to speak to the gathering. It is likely that Martin hoped for some 'star power' or to appear 'cool' to the younger set but it is also fair to say that Martin really does have a social conscience and he was pleased to give

Bono this stage from which to preach.

Bono did not disappoint; he displayed an excellent knowledge of Canadian history and politics in his folksy speech that praised Canada for its efforts to help around the world while at the same time chastising us for not doing enough; he is right on both counts. Bono actually left a recording session in Dublin to fly to Canada, arriving a few hours early to prepare his speech, and flying back again immediately afterwards. It is this dedication that lets you know that if Martin fails to deliver, Bono will live up to his promise to be a pain in the ass.

In his speech before the convention of the Liberal Party, Bono urged Canada to “embarrass the world” into following Canada’s example in trying to bring cheap generic medicines to Africa. He added that Canada is a country where idealism still resides. “You're not so self-obsessed and this is coming from a rock star, so believe me, I know self-obsessed,” he said. “I believe the world needs more Canada.”

In what appeared to be an oblique dig at the United States, Bono also remarked that “It's cheaper to stop people from hating you than it is to defend yourself against it.”

Martin himself gave an impassioned speech on November 14 after he formally accepted his party’s endorsement as the incoming PM; this was his third try at gaining the party leadership and he was not going to give a wimpy speech now that he finally had the stage. It was full of the usual political bluster, some contrite humility, a little bit of salve applied to the political wounds of his adversaries, and a lot of promises. It was an invigorating speech although the promises are mostly vague; but he has been speaking about them for months so most of them are well known. Indeed, most of the promises he makes would be good news for Canadians, and for the world, and could be solidly supported throughout our nation.

Martin promises an overhaul of the way our government functions in order to ensure a greater degree of democracy; he promises to maintain and strengthen our social safety net and our health care system; he promises to strengthen our relationships with our closest neighbour and best customer, the United States; he promises to help the underprivileged of the world; he promises to strengthen Canada by almost any measure you can imagine and insists that we should have --- and will have --- a pre-eminent place in the world. He said that Canada will emerge as a world leader, and that our time to shine is now.

But it isn’t going to happen, not on Paul Martin’s watch.

His predecessor Wilfrid Laurier is generally believed to have declared nearly a century ago that “the twentieth century belongs to Canada”. Even though that isn’t quite what he said on that evening in 1904, he was wrong anyway; and there is little reason to anticipate that Martin’s prediction is any more realistic than Laurier’s. For no matter how deeply Paul Martin feels the pain and the struggle of the poorest and weakest people on earth, he owes a huge debt to the people who put him where he now finds himself: the corporate elite. As Minister of Finance, Martin managed to corral a runaway debt and deficit problem which has made him the darling of Bay Street. And the media have sung his praises

because of the astounding success of his financial plans, all the while forgetting or ignoring why he did it: he did it to please the financial elite.

The wealthy get very nervous when they are not eking out every potential penny of investment income and they demanded that the government bring under control the inflation and debt that was diminishing the value of their investments. Like a good little boy, the governor of the Bank of Canada had supported this call to protect the wealthy and coerced the Finance Minister into supporting it as well. The method used to reduce and control these debts was based on the simple concept that all the problems flowed from the fact that labour was too expensive. The average working stiff was earning too much money, so the smart tactic was to put a lot of them out of work. Eventually, their desperation level will become so acute that they will be willing to concede to lower wages, reduced benefits and pensions, longer unpaid hours, etc.

Controlling Canada's deficit and debt was solely to benefit the wealthy elite. It did nothing for the average person, even less for the poor, and was a disaster for the long-term future of Canada. And Paul Martin was responsible for this. Further, he is a proponent of free trade and such disastrous deals as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). He is also a staunch supporter of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). All of these deals and these organizations have but one common goal: the protection of the assets of the wealthy.

So when Bono says to Martin during his convention speech that "we talk about free trade, but we refuse to let the poor people put their products on our shelves while we flood their shelves with ours", Martin can nod his head in agreement all the while knowing he will do nothing to alter that reality.

I suspect that Mr. Martin is going to learn that Bono is a man of principle and that he will eventually find the singer holding his feet to the fire. He may come to regret that he ever asked the 'cool rock 'n roll dude' to come to his party.

Paul Harris is self-employed as a consultant providing businesses with the tools and expertise to reintegrate their sick or injured employees into the workplace. Canadian businesses can reach him at paul@working-solutions.ca. He has traveled extensively in what is usually known as "the Third World" and has an abiding interest in history, social justice, morality and, well, just about everything. Paul is also a freelance writer and can be reached at paul@escritoire.ca. He lives in Canada.