

The pathos in Martin's career

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When a parliamentary career of 39 years is closed out it merits notice. If it were Senator Azellus Denis who was departing Parliament after such a span one could encompass a political epitaph in a column. But it's Azellus' fellow Liberal recruit to the 18th Parliament, convened in 1935, who is leaving the 30th Parliament to become our High Commissioner to Great Britain.

Just to reproduce his entry in the parliamentary guide or Who's Who takes hundreds of words.

Seventy-one years of age, 23 years a cabinet minister, twice a contender for the leadership of the governing party, in Canada, Paul Martin is a phenomenon.

He begins a high-profile ambassadorial stint of at least four years. He should cap a unique career of persistence and survival. Through crippling disappointments he has soldiered on, always respected for his skills although the respect has always had an underside of uneasiness because the skills were so polished as to make an impress of ambiguity, if not insincerity.

In estimating Paul Martin's contributions to our politics of the past four decades I find several striking aspects, one gets led into a comparison of him with some of his party and parliamentary contemporaries — Pearson, St. Laurent, Diefenbaker, Howe, Pickersgill, Gordon, Douglas and Knowles, Power, Chevrier, Claxton, Lesage and Hellyer.

The bogging quality of Mr. Martin is his tireless energy.

Tommy Douglas, a fellow delegate with Paul Martin to the World Youth Conference in 1936, has told me that the young Liberal was indefatigable through all the routines of travel, meeting, committees and the conference socializing. And last Parliament as he wound up a rather undistinguished term as Senate leader, he was still as indefatigable.

Button-holding, phoning, anticipating, assuaging and dealing. Even as a senator he has treated Windsor as though he still has an electorate to meet.

He still pulls legs in droll and unabrasive ways, more aware of the nuances of who's up and who's down, and who may be a comer than anyone else in politics.

This has been his way since the beginning, operating in every waking hour. Only John Diefenbaker and

Stanley Knowles stand comparison with him for durability and assiduity. Of course, each may be etched more sharply on the public consciousness because they've had less heed to mute their pursuits because they have usually been in opposition with ministerial colleagues and the mystery of inner government to consider.

A point about the Martin career which his new appointment merely confirms is a long obsession with foreign affairs. In the biographical data which he himself has framed there's no note of the major changes in health and welfare which took place while he was the responsible minister.

Instead, there is a long litany of duties and several achievements at the United Nations.

This is the height of paradox.

A politician who was obsessive in minding his constituency store and building up the most extensive contacts across Canada in modern political history has simply no identity with a matter of major domestic policy.

Walter Gordon had economic nationalism; Claxton had the Canada Council; Knowles had old age pensions. Douglas is linked with hospitalization and medicare; Hellyer with services' unification and Lesage with the French upsurge.

The pathos of this Martin particularism in foreign affairs is that he never really got the emblazoned writ of the internationalist and diplomat put together by Lester Pearson.

When Trudeau elevated Mr. Martin to the Senate, replacing him as external affairs minister by Mitchell Sharp, it quickly became apparent, given the new line and policy initiatives, that both the Pearson role and style as carried on by Martin were being rejected.

We tend to forget that in the early winter of 1967-68 Paul Martin was the leading candidate for his party leadership and to be prime minister.

He was trampled in the convention, not only by Pierre Trudeau but by Bob Winters, John Turner and Paul Hellyer.

As a lead into his candidacy Mr. Martin published a book, as did several other contenders. But his was "Paul Martin Speaks for Canada." All its selections were on foreign policy. He seemed to be still judging political repute on international work, on Pearson's Nobel Prize.

He seemed unaware that his need was to project a stronger image of stances and objectives in domestic politics. Public interest and issues had changed. There is a moral for young politicians in the Martin failures in 1958 and 1968 and in his inability to bring through the Senate Reform he heralded when he took leadership there in the fall of 1968.

Beware of gaining, even through immense industry, the reputation of being too smooth a politician, too clever a word-monger — at its simplest, the very polished qualities with their adroitness and ambiguity which Mr. Martin honed became a caricature. While parliamentarians smiled at his circumlocutions they also made him a stock joke because of such finesse.

Over the years this led to some distrust of the man. He never allayed this by an extra generosity in warmth to younger politicians which might have brought him disciples, power in the caucus and his ultimate goal — to lead Canada.