The perils of electoral success

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LSE Professor Emeritus [Rodney Barker](#) discusses the challenges faced by Gordon Brown and David Cameron in winning over the UK electorate in 2010.

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How will the parties try to gain the support of the electorate? When competing for votes, political parties in Britain, like parties everywhere, have relied regularly on tales about their opponents and the threats those opponents are alleged to pose to nation, society, religion, or the economy. But the problem for all the major parties in Britain ever since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet and East European Communism, is that the old enemies have evaporated. Of the plausible enemies, or at least villains, one set are bankers whom both major parties are wary of attacking, and the other set are MPs themselves. Don't expect any of the major parties to promise voters that they will protect them against the greed and irresponsibility of bankers or Members of Parliament. They are all alone without an enemy in the world, and will be desperately seeking for bogeymen to frighten the voters.

Gordon Brown and the Labour Government are victims of the party's electoral success. The Conservatives were worn down by the same disease under John Major. Each election victory increases the distance between the successful party and the faults, disasters, and pretensions of the government it displaced. And each election victory increases the likelihood that, whatever the voters' worries and resentments, the current government takes the blame. The longer a government survives, the less there is anyone else to blame for anything, from the economy to the behaviour of young people, from the state of housing to the state of the railways. There is nothing, or very little, that any government can, in a democracy, do about this. In the first years of office, politicians can always say 'look at the mess the other lot left us with.' But after one or two election victories, they then face an electorate some of whom were children or not even born when the other lot were in power, and many more of whom have forgotten the resentments of the past and know only the grumbles of the present.

All parties, and particularly all leaders, are vulnerable to conceptual refocusing by the voters. When you look at a garden sprinkler, it appears to be going round clockwise. Blink, and it seems to be spinning in the opposite direction. The same with political reputations. A set of characteristics can rapidly switch from forming a positive to forming a negative image. When Gordon Brown became prime minister, his virtues were seen as reliability, solidity, caution, persistence. Things only needed to go a little bit wrong for those very same features to be seen as boring, unimaginative, indecisive, and obstinate. In the same way his predecessor Tony Blair was to begin with articulate, charismatic, and principled and then, after the invasion of Iraq, that changed to glib, flashy, and arrogant. David Cameron is not immune. His latest venture into roadside posters has begun to turn young, sincere, and visionary, into airbrushed, vacuous, and lacking in precise policies. All of this matters, but is difficult for politicians to control or predict. Even the radical restructuring, by Margaret Thatcher, of her voice and her hair, didn't save her in the end. And for our current leaders, even re-launching octaves and hair are not seriously available.

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