

# New Times

# The Party Is Over

The old political party is in decline. The world has moved on and it has had its day. A different kind of party is now needed, argues **Sarah Benton**, a party that is more flexible and less romanticised

**T**he political party as we have known it is an anachronism. Out of all the tasks it is set there are only two it can carry out with any adequacy: it can contest elections and it can produce a caste of professional politicians to take part in the ritual of public affairs. People have expected so much more. But the party can rarely enforce democracy in government or civil life; where 'the private' advances, so the party's control of the state recedes. It does not usually emancipate its individual members; it is not a means through which people can exercise more choice in their lives or more control over their lives. It is not an 'authentic' voice of the people: the most common view of party politicians is that they lie. Far from standing for democracy, for most people, the political party represents ritual tedium for the masses who at worst fear they are subjected to the professional exclusivity, fanaticism and manipulation of the few. It is not surprising that political parties of the old sort are in decline all over Europe and North America. Only those that have changed their ways face the future with anticipation.

The 'old parties' are those that were established by the 1920s. They differed from each other in ideology and social composition but they were all a response to two phenomena: the advent of the mass vote and the emergence of the

all-powerful nation state. Each of these - the state and the mass vote - shaped the development of the other through the medium of the party. The pace-makers were the mass parties with a formal ideology of socialism - including the fascists of Italy and the Nazis of Germany, both of which began with, at least, a rhetoric of power to the masses via the state, as of course did the communist parties.

Unlike the upper class, with its access to many forms of power through the army (Prussia in particular), church (Italy), land (most of Eastern Europe), and business (Britain, Germany, USA) both the professional middle class and the then huge working class had access to power only through the state. Unlike the upper class, their only access to the state was through the party. The development of systems of mass production, especially in the USA, Germany and Britain, also shaped the mass vote and produced the potent imagery of the working class as a single, dynamic whole.

Even those who were dismayed by the dawn of the party age, noted the exciting power of mass politics. 'All is hurry and agitation; night is used for travel, day for business, even "holiday trips" have become a strain on the nervous system. Important political, industrial and financial crises carry excitement into far wider circles of people than they used to do; political

life is engaged in quite generally; political, religious and social struggles, party-politics, electioneering, and the enormous spread of trade-unionism inflame tempers, place an ever greater strain on the mind, and encroach upon the hours for recreation, sleep and rest.' (This is Freud in 1893, quoting a contemporary in '*Civilised*' *Sexual Morality*.)

**The catastrophic failure of capitalism after the first world war** ensured that the mass parties represented the best claim to manage the future. With the dereliction of mass unemployment, only a greatly enlarged role for the state could produce balance, stability and social equity. To socialists of all sorts this was so obvious it was just common sense. Where social democrats diverged from communists and fascists was in their pursuit of a state that would be invulnerable to demagogues and the mob.

It was their parties that took the lead in shaping modern politics. In the name of delivering power to the people, socialist parties from the 1930s and particularly after the second world war treated politics as a profession and reforming society as a matter of good management. The crunch came in the 1950s; those governments which had ceded fewest political rights in civil society, for workers or consumers for instance, found themselves the most stultified. They produced a form of government which cannot regenerate its own political drive, whether it was the Soviet Union's 'era of stagnation' or Britain's Labour Party. Labour's first postwar government survived just six years, defeated less by a newly triumphant conservatism than by its own internal exhaustion. In this inability to regenerate itself, postwar British socialism has been different from most West European countries. It has had fewer roots in essentially heterogeneous communities which in turn have had less political autonomy from the state. It is no accident that the British Left, especially the Labour Party, has responded by a bitter turning inwards.

While the Left pursued professionalism, the Right, especially in Britain, still offered up amateurs (as indeed the *form* of British political government is still a sham anachronism of monarchy in collaboration with amateurs. Its members of parliament in both Commons and Lords are notionally and, in the case of many Tories, actually, part-time.) Through much of Europe after the war, the Right resisted socialism's claims in the name of small 'c' conservatism, a long drawn out nostalgia for the images of empire and supposed social harmony of the pre-party era. It was the inability of conservatism in the 1960s to face the modern world, as much as Labour's claims that it *was* the modern world, which brought in Wilson's government - and obviated the need for a radical

rethink about the party.

For Wilson had brilliantly mastered the images of an anachronistic, anti-democratic conservatism in contrast with 'scientific', productive socialism. His denunciation of the Tories for choosing a peer, Lord Home, as its leader in 1963, said it all: instead of the democratic party, he jeered, the Tories had used an 'aristocratic cabal'. Thus: 'After half a century of democratic advance, of social revolution, of rising expectations, the whole process has ground to a halt with a fourteenth earl'. How can this 'scion of an effete establishment', he demanded, 'lead the scientific revolution and mobilisation of the skill and talents of all our people in the struggle to restore Britain's position in the world?' If that accurately represented the Tories' deferral of tomorrow's world, it also disguised how the deferral allowed Labour to speak for a winning alliance without any serious rethinking. Only the emergence in the 1970s of a new Right which claimed to represent the future, scuttled Conservative nostalgia, replacing it with a contempt for the immediate past and a curious silence about the heyday of the mass party. It was as though their party had no history.

**Today's Right is quite right to recognise** that an era was ending in the 1960s. Before 1950, it was still possible to conceive of the political party as the 'modern prince', modern because the collective agency of party had superseded the mediaeval individual leader; but a prince nonetheless, an heroic entity. This romantic conception of party endured until the 1960s; it nestled even in the most prosaic bosom of British Labour. For instance, Francis Williams, a true Labour loyalist, friend of Clem Attlee and former editor of the *Daily Herald*, describes the birth of the Labour Party (*Fifty Years March, The Rise Of The Labour Party*) in this way: 'And now, on that February morning in 1900, the curtain was rising on a new act in this tremendous drama...' And: 'The Party born on that grey February day in a drab commercial street off Fleet Street was to... mobilise behind it and become the chief instrument of a political uprising of the working classes of Britain that was to change the social and economic face of the country out of all recognition...' This hero would go on to carry through 'a programme which would have seemed the wildest and most revolutionary utopianism to those passing along Farringdon Street about their ordinary business on that February day in the first year of the new century.'

Romantic? Undoubtedly. Francis Williams was writing in 1950. A dip into any account of politics between 1890 and 1920 will come up with even more stirring stuff. Thus (and quite randomly), a Mr Pickles urging political unity at the Co-operative Movement in 1917: 'I am attending meetings one night as a socialist, another as a trade

unionist, and another as a member of a co-operative board, but I am working for democracy in sections... Let us put all our cards on the table, stand together, and go forward for democracy - (applause) - triumphant democracy.' His rallying cry was for party unity, but he spoke too for the unity of the masses who made the party. The hero of modernist imagery in the 1920s and 1930s was, if not the mass itself, an anonymous worker, individual in statuesque form but not in character.

Like a prince of old, the party demanded loyalty, inspired love and devotion, promised delivery from evil, fought battles on behalf of the needy, brought nobility into the grey, drab lives of the many. Because it was a collective, it also exacted discipline and demanded sacrifice. It would not have been heroic had it not. (The forms and imagery of the military were never very far away either). And if the party was a heroic warrior, so too were the people. The party was the people, they and it were a single whole.

Nobody today regards the party in this way. Lingering romantics see it as having been 'corrupted' by power or betrayed by weak, susceptible men while the working class retains its character as a martyred unity. For others, the loss of illusion is just part of the modern condition. The loss of faith is in the party, in the state, in politics itself - and in the masses. To read today the futurists quoted by Marshall Berman (*All That Is Solid*): 'We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals', is to know we live in a different era.

Today we do not believe that the mass can be made into a single, heroic whole by a political party. As Marshall Berman notes, a distinctive feature of today's modernity is the sense of fragmentation, accompanied by a generalised loss of meaning. The 'new times' argued Stuart Hall in *Marxism Today* (October 1988), are characterised thus: 'greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption.' Not only is the whole fragmented, so is the 'self too. The Co-op's Mr Pickles in 1917, perhaps felt the same; he felt all could be made whole by the party. He felt his individual, sensate self should be lost in the party surge to democracy.

**O**ur conceptions of party have not been brought into line 'with this new reality of multiple selves who can no longer be marshalled into one mass party with a single aim: to win control of an all-embracing state. The attempts by party leaders to reshape their parties as both professional elites and



purveyors of popular political culture are jagged with these contradictions. In January, the Labour Party launched a campaign to double its membership. Neil Kinnock insisted that they faced no political obstacles, only administrative blocks. Yet the Tribune group pamphlet, *A Mass Party*, homes in on the need to create a new political culture in the party and society at large. Paddy Ashdown, leader of the SLD, measures his party's claim to replace Labour in membership figures. Yet his new party, under pressure to produce this first professional elite able to move with the media times, is disconsolate as the hold-true Liberals turn their back on professionalism to haunt the old/new community politics.

Only the Conservatives appear to have no qualms. Peter Brooke, Conservative Party chairman, launched their recruitment campaign in June 1988; but they were quite clear about their aims; more members meant more money and the next generation of a professional elite. Their political culture of garden parties for the women and clubs for businessmen is quite sufficient for their needs.

Among the rest, the crisis of purpose runs deep. What are all these members for? If party members are the cadres of a political mission, what exactly is that mission? For the old form of party is an anachronism not only because it's the wrong shape, not only because we no longer come in just two or three classes, but because so much power has been shifted out of the state machinery which the party was shaped to control.

**The desultory connections of people,** party, parliament and state are common to many countries. They are testament to the disappearance of power; like the Scarlet Pimpernel, political power no longer has a fixed, visible locus. It is not found firmly in the British state and certainly not in the British parliament; it is not tucked in the pockets of M15 pursuing its paranoid fantasies through our keyholes nor is it filed in the cabinets of Luxembourg or Brussels. It is not floating in a silicon valley or sitting snugly in the IMF, the Group of 7, the headquarters of Coca Cola, among Italian freemasons circling the Vatican or in the safe of a mighty arms manufacturer.

It's in all those places and none, here there and nowhere. There is no single citadel to be captured, no commanding height which, once scaled, gives a political party power over the civic universe. As the fragments of power whirl frustratingly in and out of vision, conspiracy theories multiply. Many of them are correct; there are indeed conspiracies hatched and carried out by private companies, shady networks of military and commercial interests, the state's secret underworld. Some do considerable damage; all are anti-democratic. Never dismiss a good conspiracy when one is hauled into the daylight. But do not either attribute to

it a *Boys' Own* capacity to rule the world through its secretly acquired powers. The world's not like that.

If political power cannot be delivered by simple control over the nation state, then the form and function of parties, designed to win such control, have to change if they are to survive.

It is for this reason, as much as the changing sociology of class relations, that the Conservatives have been the dominant power this decade. Their rhetoric of rolling back the frontiers of the state is an acknowledgement of the limits of the nation state in today's conjunction of economic and political power. This is not because the Thatcherites were immensely more percipient than the socialists; rather it was because Conservatives have never been so dependent on state powers to get what they want. They have thus had a freedom of manoeuvre in a changing world which parties of the Left have not enjoyed. The fact that much which constitutes 'Thatcherism' has been, like earlier Conservative eras, an ad hoc response to circumstances is clear. In *Popular Capitalism*, John Redwood, a tipped-for-the-top MP who worked in Thatcher's policy unit as well as Rothschild's privatisation unit, describes how accidentally they arrived at privatisation. The strategy that became the driving force of Thatcherism was not planned but stumbled upon.

Parties in other countries have followed suit, though much less wholeheartedly. The crisis for British left parties has been far more acute both because the economic problems which the nation state is expected to solve have been more grave for much longer; and also because of the peculiar role of trade unions in Britain. In no other country have unions, party and state been tied together so intractably in what became a deadening mission to create a bureaucratic corporate state.

At the time it seemed to be a juggernaut that could not be diverted. Hence what seems like the overkill of Thatcherism in severing those links. For Labour, the consequences have been near-fatal. Because that alliance was dominated by a peculiarly British labourist/corporate view of political power, the Labour establishment was also less flexible, less responsive to both external circumstances and to nudges for change that came from below. For it should not be forgotten that criticisms of Labour's dependence on a bureaucratic state and undemocratic union leaderships came first from the Left.

**Given the recent history of the Labour Party,** it seems absurd to suggest it has not changed its form, or that it has failed to look self-critically at how it works. The political crisis of the 1970s, which split virtually every party on the Left, produced the most protracted drive to change Labour's structure in the party's history. Its successes came

from a drive for democracy and against domination by the old labourist officials; its weaknesses from the conversion of demands for democracy into a punitive war against betrayal conducted in an increasingly suffocating political vacuum.

The results are well-known. Led for the most part by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, with most of the left-wing groups, the party introduced the right of constituency parties to re-select their MPs and, in a manoeuvre to keep its by now fractious parts together, an electoral college for the party leader and deputy. The focus on internal change continued through the 1980s. For the first half of the decade it was dominated by two demands which were tactically linked, though had little connection in principle. The first was for leaders' accountability, the second for representation of modern communities.

**T**he attempt to make the parliamentary party accountable to the party in conference and in constituencies certainly made MPs more responsive to their constituents. The favoured relationship of right-wing MPs was of occasional visits accompanied by various 'favours' delivered to the region in the form of extra state spending. The reforms have created the 'constituency MP' who holds at least a fortnightly surgery and spends much of his or her time dealing with individual constituents' problems. The down side of this is that a party of good constituency MPs is not easily able to become a political leader, its collective mind focused on issues of national strategy. New individual heroes emerge - like Robin Cook or John Smith; but the Parliamentary Labour Party does not provide a collective political leadership. Thus the reforms have not delivered two crucial goals: the creation of an intellectual, political leadership, and roots in the many communities which comprise society.

The immediate consequence of the drive to reform ironically made that harder. It provoked the breakaway of the SDP. That seemed to prove the rightness of the Left's belief that the party was harbouring traitors who would, if let off the leash, sell the party down the river. The response of the leadership (to Peter Tatchell for instance) made the Left define itself as victim of a witch-hunt. The tradition of distrust of all leaders surged to the top to dominate Labour's political culture. But this bitterness came also from the barely-articulated recognition that political power was escaping from the party. Only by tightening the screws might some hold be kept on it.

The second demand, for representation by the new political identities of race and sex, acknowledged the shift of social and political power; class was no longer the single embodiment of oppressors and oppressed. Just as the power of the state lost its central locus,

**'Our conception of party has not been brought into line with this new reality of multiple selves'**



so power in society had fractured. The one-time unity of the working class had been a unity imposed by the dominance of the skilled, white male worker. His authority at work, in the union, at home was under threat from all sides.

The demand was also an attempt to force into the party the means for its self-regeneration. That is, the new, informal constituencies of women and blacks could bring fresh life when the old bureaucracies of union and party officials could not. But the desperation to secure political representation divorced from any political programmes on race or sex, was a mark of the wholly formal, empty quality of the politics.

And it is here that we see the fateful inadaptability of party forms to modern life. The activist, preoccupied with council affairs or party committees, became increasingly remote from life outside the party. And the further away real power seemed from the Labour Party, the more ferocious became the demands that its symbolic form be redistributed round the members. As the state receded as a focus for political demands, and party establishment expanded to fill the space.

**In the 1980s, the party also became a magnet for the movements which had developed out of the 60s and 70s. This is a comment on the limits of movements, a pointer to what parties alone can deliver.**

Unlike the party, harnessed to the needs of the state, the movement was truly 'modern'. It rejected class as a determinant of individual political choice. It sought to eliminate the gap between personal feeling and public action. The liberation of the political actors was as important as, if not more important than, the conquest of opponents. The movement rejected institutions for itself, as these would tend to freeze political positions and embed conflicts to win control. It upheld direct action both as a form of self-expression and as more effective than formal political procedures. The movement was oriented towards action, but changing culture and attitudes were goals as legitimate as law reform. Its modernism lay in its rejection of the idea that there is a single oppressed people or a single source of authority to be undermined or of power to be captured.

Most of these ideas were common to the black movement, the women's movement, the gay movement and later the green and peace movements and, to a limited extent, those disabled by injury, illness or addiction. They have in common the fact that their potential membership is circumscribed, and their goals are not universal. In this, they differ from parties.

Nationalist movements, now so powerful as the agency against Communist Party *ancien regimes*, as well as the British party *ancien regime*, differ again. Though they share the emphasis on culture and speak the language of

liberation and radical change, they have powerful roots in old traditions of masculinity, land and family honour all of which bind together dominant racial communities. They look backwards to an old brotherhood as well as forward to a new democracy. Apart from the greens, only nationalist movements have produced national parties and, unlike the greens, they alone claim to speak for the whole people, rather than acting as an avant-garde to advance a minority view.

Green parties in all countries have attempted to be 'parties of a new type' and to a considerable extent they have succeeded. Their structures are much looser and, in particular, they acknowledge the 'person' in politics. From its inception as a po-faced very English Ecology Party in the 1970s, the British Green Party has borrowed most from movements and from abroad; its conference now falls over itself to help members feel themselves, so to speak. Like movements, green parties expect individual members to embody political principles in their personal life.

These trends are a direct result of the movement ethos, which sought to dissolve the barrier between public and private principles. There is the same stress on authenticity; only that which comes direct from the self, the author, has validity. The SDP, in its early days when feminism was a strong influence, demonstrated its modernity by establishing 'networks' to encourage women's participation. But, in opposition to the Liberals especially, it also raged against 'old-fashioned' sloppiness. New practices were designed as much to create a professional elite as to dissolve the gulf between professional and amateur in politics. The requirements of power and the exigencies of size both count against new forms. The larger and more established the West German Greens have become, the harder it has been for them to maintain their ethos of an open democracy.

**W**e should not be romantic about movements. While Geoff Mulgan in *MT* (Dec 1988) is right to commend the openness and resilience of movement networks, he slides over the actual political weakness of 'weak' structures, in particular their inability to change the state. Many of those we still refer to as the 'new movements', as representing the spirit of a new age, have lost their elan and cohesion. Their values survive and networks have proved resilient. But the mood is of consolidation and solace, rather than advance.

There have been successes. All the 'new' movements achieved lasting changes in awareness. They have been truly liberating. They have changed the lives of the direct participants and of those around them. They have given a political voice to those who would otherwise be silent. They have all challenged the conventions of politics. Movements have been the main agents

in exposing the anachronistic structures of party politics.

Parties are not, of course, going to wither away. How then can the party be changed so that it is a positive agent for freedom and democracy? How can parties both aim to win state power and act independently of the state, as voices of the people?

**We must first accept a limited role for government and the state.** The most we can ask of a state is that it lays down the essential standards of free and fair treatment on which civilised life depends. In actuality, that is a lot more than the nation state or transnational institutions do at the moment.

If the potential of the state as an initiator of progress is less, then there has to be a corresponding increase in the self-activity of our multiple selves in civil society. We all have to imagine how things ought to be run in ways that keep open democratic channels without requiring compulsory attendance at weekly meetings. How can the NHS be made responsive to its clients? The bus service? British Rail? How can a local community get its streets cleaned when and how it wants? How do we balance the rights of street-cleaners with the rights of street-users?

This is the issue of political leadership, and for Labour, it means a different relationship with the parliamentary party. Instead of seeing it as the apex of the pyramid, it should be just one wing of the party. Forms of political power outside parliament need more energy devoted to them. This will be increasingly true if the party is serious about decentralisation.

As we have learned from movements, people will begin to form political groups as a need arises. The party should not seek to take these over, as communists have done, institutionalise them - or ignore them, as was Labour's way. Rather it must be able to bring together temporary alliances of interest groups which may well feel themselves to be in conflict. This will mean co-operation with other parties on specific issues and values.

Too often, parties of the Left are perceived as dogmatic and exclusive, rewarding only those they agree with. The party must be the principal defender of democratic channels for everyone. Through this, it can be the defender of civil society against the authoritarianism of the state.

In short, the old relationship of homogeneous state and class, which created the mass political party of reform, no longer exists. But the very fragmentation of society creates a need for clear political leadership; the alternative is a drift towards popular and governmental authoritarianism to stave off 'things falling apart.' The creation of a political form that can provide that leadership, as well as the promotion of civil political activity, independent of the state, are the two overriding needs. •

**'The Conservatives have had a freedom of manoeuvre in a changing world which parties of the Left have not enjoyed'**

