The Failings of Political Parties: Reality or Perception?

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Introduction

Political parties in the UK today – as in so many other countries - are widely seen as disappointing in their democratic performance. Those who purport to care about democracy are anxious. There is widespread evidence of disconnect, alienation and apathy among citizens - and the search is on for explanations and for ways to put things right. The blame for this state of affairs is heaped on various targets: the parties and the politicians tend to lead the way, but somewhat less tangibly, 'the political system' is apt to come in for criticism from some quarters. Others prefer to level their sights on the role of the mass media, and occasionally even on the public itself. In this paper, I shall examine the nature and causes of the present discontent by addressing the failings of political parties, and perceived.

How far one views parties as 'failing' depends largely on one's normative take on democracy.

Taking a cue from Alan Ware (1987) it is useful, I believe, to identify three core elements to democracy. These receive differing emphases in the various treatments of the subject and the different weight accorded to each element inevitably affects perceptions of party performance. Ware refers to the first democratic element as *interest optimalization,* the second as *civic orientation*, and the third as *popular choice and control.* I will use these three perspectives on democratic theory as a way of organizing my discussion of the current performance of parties in the UK.

Democracy as interest optimalization

For a political system to be democratic, Ware suggests (1987: 8), 'rules or procedures employed must bring about results that optimally promote or defend the interests of the largest number of people in the relevant arena'. From this perspective, there have broadly been two approaches to the role of parties in fostering democracy, both of which focus implicitly on the political functions of articulation and aggregation of interests. Each raises problems of party performance in contemporary democracies such as the UK.

First, there are pluralists (Truman 1951; Dahl 1961) who are not intrinsically hostile to parties as agencies of representative democracy, but who see them as largely secondary to interest groups. There is of course widespread evidence in UK and elsewhere of the burgeoning role of interest groups as rivals to articulators of demands (Aarts 1995; Byrne 1997), a development seemingly consistent with the pluralist perspective. For some this represents a major challenge to party, which reflects the failure of parties to perform this key representative role (Richardson 1995). Interests groups, however, are hardly unproblematic from the perspective of democracy. For one thing, they tend to be less internally democratic as organizations than parties. For another, the

burgeoning of single-interest associations is part of problem for the related function of the aggregation of interests. Somehow, somewhere in any democratic political system, political agents have to bundle up the plethora of group demands into (more or less) coherent packages of policy. This process involves prioritisation of interests and generates coalitions of support – and it is essential to the effectiveness and stability of the political system. But pluralists themselves were quick to note the problems caused by an explosion of interest articulation which is unmatched by a commensurate rise in a political system's aggregative capacity (Crozier et al 1975). Recent comparative research has confirmed that the expansion of political agendas to accommodate new debates over environmental quality, social norms, lifestyle choices, multiculturalism, and other social and cultural issues (Dalton 2004). In such fluid, multidimensional policy space it is very difficult for governments to satisfy most of the people most of the time.

Processes of social and political change have almost certainly confronted the parties with new challenges in this respect, as the growing heterogeneity of British society has brought new social group demands and issues on to the agenda of politics to which the parties have sometimes struggled to respond adequately (Webb 2000: ch.1). It is hard to see an alternative vehicle to the political party for the aggregation of political demands in a country like the UK. Single-issue groups may rival parties in the 'market for activism', but they are not in the business of bundling together a multiplicity of interests into ordered and coherent programmes of legislative action; interest aggregation, then, remains a core party function. However, this task has become more complex given the growing number of cross-cutting cleavages and issue dimensions which have emerged in the UK (think of European integration, Scottish and Welsh nationalism, gender politics, environmentalism and the response to 9/11 for starters); these issues do not always fit

easily into the traditional boxes of party politics, which makes it a struggle to build sustainable coalitions of support. Moreover, this struggle may even have undermined the ability of parties to articulate traditional group demands; for Labour at least, the adoption of a more broadly aggregative inter-class appeal (the catch-all strategy) since the time of Harold Wilson's leadership in the 1960s has weakened its role as a working class tribune. In short, in attempting to develop its aggregative capacity, Labour may well have weakened its ability to articulate demands, a phenomenon that reached its apogee under Tony Blair more than thirty years later.

Aggregation is a function which also features highly among the concerns of the second group of 'interest optimizers', the social choice acolytes of Kenneth Arrow (1951) who argue that the electoral process is destined to be flawed in as much as it produces voting 'paradoxes' and 'cycles'. Their conclusion is that it is virtually impossible to satisfy people's wants in an optimal way, unless policy is made in homogeneous and consensual communities (which advanced industrial societies the UK manifestly are not), or in pure two-party contexts: the latter scenario simplifies programmatic choice to a binary decision-making process and thereby avoids the well-known problem of 'cyclical majorities', which arises when three or more alternatives are available. Strictly speaking, all contemporary advanced industrial democracies fail such a test: even the USA, the nearest thing to pure two-partism, does not always guarantee voters a straightforward choice between two candidates, even for presidential office, and as we have already observed, the UK is less and less purely a two-party system. From this perspective, then, parties do not help avoid this democratic paradox. That said, Shepsle and Bonchek (1997) calculate that, in a three-voter, three-candidate election, only 12 preference arrangements out of 216 possible arrangements lead to intransitive group preferences under plurality voting (as used in the UK). This implies that the arcane concerns of the social choice theorists about interest

optimalisation may be more apparent than real. The problem of aggregation is a far more tangible one for contemporary political parties – but there are no viable alternatives to parties in this role.

Democracy as civic orientation

The second element of democracy identified by Ware is that of civic orientation. From this perspective, democracy is not fully realized until citizens express their share interests as members of the a community, a theme which goes back at least as far as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Participation in the democratic process is vital to the political education of citizens if they are to develop this civic orientation. Advocates have therefore often placed political participation and education high on their criteria for evaluating democracy and its institutions. Implicitly, too, the aggregation of demands into a general will which expresses the public interest is important to this approach. Contemporary political parties are unlikely to fare well by the civic democrat's standards, however.

There are a number of issues to unpick here. First, it might be argued, in Rousseauean vein, that parties are inimical since they tend to articulate and foster narrow group interests to the detriment of the wider community: this is very different to the view of pluralists, who regard pursuit of group interests as central to healthy democracy. It can be readily appreciated that contemporary parties in a country such as the UK can do little to instil such a demanding notion of civic orientation. Then again, we need hardly detail ourselves long with this concern if we are focused on parties in the real world of today, for this purist Rousseauan – one might say Jacobin – vision of a one and indivisible people sets an unnecessarily high standard. There has never been a time since the onset of the democracy in Western Europe or North America when one could say that it was realised. And yet, there was clearly a time when parties and political elites were more

favourably looked upon by Western publics, so this criterion does nothing to help us understand why parties have fallen into such disfavour.

We can, however, adopt a less demanding version of the concept, such that any kind of community consciousness, including group identity based on region, class, religion or ethnicity, qualifies. Parties were indeed central to fostering such community identities at one time, in many countries, including Britain. But the widely described demise of cleavage politics and mass parties based on class communities or religious denominations must offer a major clue as to why the way we regard parties has changed so much.[1] Far fewer citizens than was once the case now feel themselves to be affectively wedded to particular parties as an expression of social identity and interest, and this loss of habitual affective loyalty means that far more of us assess parties in purely instrumental terms.[2] That is, they must be seen to 'deliver' in terms of governmental performance, in this age of valence evaluations of politicians by voters (Clarke et al 2004). And public perceptions of governing performance depend critically on the presentation of politics by the mass media, of course. In the language of political functions, we are saying that the parties no longer perform the role of social integration of certain groups, and that they have consequently become more vulnerable to the impact of those with whom they share the task of political communication. I shall return to these question of media effects in due course.

The civic vision of democracy is based on the normative ideal of a highly engaged citizenry. The failure of political parties to channel and foster political participation is of course one of the major laments of this school. Although it is possible to point to the increased participatory rights which British parties have offered their members in matters of candidate and leadership-selection in recent years (Webb 2000: ch.7), it is impossible to overlook the overwhelming evidence of

membership and turnout decline. Even allowing for vagaries of accurate data, party membership decline has been little short of precipitous. In 1964 over 9 per cent of all registered electors were members of the main three British parties with nationwide organizations; by the time of the 1992 general election, barely 2 per cent were (an 80 per cent decline in proportional terms). Notwithstanding the additional growth of certain minor parties since the 1960s (notably the Scottish Nationalists) and the remarkable surge in Labour Party recruitment after Tony Blair was elected leader in the summer of 1994, it is quite evident that a significant negative trend is apparent. In any case, New Labour's burst of recruitment soon started to reverse itself after the election of May 1997. This collapse of membership has a counterpart in declining levels of party activism, moreover among both Labour and Conservative Party members (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 202; Whiteley et al 1994: 223-4). Since 1997, electoral turnout appears to have moved in the same direction. All of this suggests that from the civic visionary's perspective political parties are at best irrelevant, at worst downright pathological. It is not surprising then, that one of the major sources of attack on parties today comes from the participationist left.

The participationist critique

It is common for critics to argue that the solution to the perceived problems of contemporary democratic systems lies in an injection of more participatory forms of democracy. Among other things, this approach proposes that, given the particular weakness of parties in terms of their ability to provide representative and participatory linkages between state and society, citizens are becoming disaffected and disengaged. Give them more and better forms of democratic linkage, goes the argument, with an emphasis on greater participation, and the disaffection will evaporate. A striking recent example of the argument that participatory reforms can (in part) provide an answer to the problem of democratic disconnect is provided by the report of the Power Inquiry.

The Power Report was published in the spring of 2006 as 'an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy', funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable and Reform Trusts and carried out by a Commission headed up by Helena Kennedy, QC. The Report is essentially a reaction to what its authors believe is a crisis in British governance. At the heart of this crisis, it suggests, lies a sclerotic system which has failed to keep pace with social change and which is run by elites disconnected from those they are supposed to serve, many of whom are therefore turning away from conventional politics altogether.[3]

In effect, the Power Report counterposes a people seemingly bursting with pent-up democratic energy with an elitist and bankrupt political system incapable of tapping that burgeoning potential. The Report's solution to this problem is a set of recommendations (Power 2006: 20-25), which it claims will contribute to 'the creation of a culture of political engagement in which policy and decision-making employs direct input from citizens'. The Report is somewhat vague as to the precise forms by which direct participation might be enhanced, though it argues that 'citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management' (Power 2006: 24), and expresses its confidence that advances in communication technology will 'increasingly allow large numbers of citizens to become engaged in political decisions in a focussed way'. (Power 2006: 229).

The Power Report is contemporary and has caught the attention of observers in Britain, including some in government, but one could of course refer to the far more developed arguments of well-known political theorists and theorists such as Carole Pateman (1970), Joseph Bessette (1980), Benjamin Barber (1984), Joshua Cohen (1989), or James Fishkin (1991). But what evidence is there that Britain (or for that matter, other Western democracies afflicted by similar trends in

political disaffection and declining participation) is a nation of disappointed democrats who yearn for deeper and more extensive political engagement? Russell Dalton's comparative research (2004) suggests that the principal reason for growing political disaffection is the rising expectations of government that citizens of Western democracies have. These expectations are most pronounced among the young, the better educated, the more affluent, and the post-materialist; while these are the very groups that have most directly benefited from the spread of affluence, their expectations have increased the most, as has their tendency to criticise political elites, institutions and processes. Yet as he sees it, they do not represent a threat to democracy per se; on the contrary, these 'dissatisfied democrats' are driven by a passion for the democratic creed that fosters disillusionment with the way current political processes operate. These empirical findings seem to be consistent with the arguments of participationist critics.

However, there are those who cast considerable doubt on the participationist critique of parties. With respect to Britain, for instance, Philip Norton (HoL Debates, 15 June 2006) cites evidence from *The Audit of Political Engagement* survey which shows that, although people tend to claim that they want to have a say in the way the country is run and feel that they are presently denied the opportunity, when pushed on what type of activity they would be prepared to engage in, a different picture emerges: '…beyond signing petitions, the vast majority of respondents were unwilling to undertake any further action.' Furthermore, Norton cites Declan McHugh's (2006) argument that more participatory democracy, '…may only succeed in engaging those already over-represented amongst voters and party members—that is, the educated, affluent and middle class. Mechanisms designed to provide greater opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in decision-making as a means of increasing legitimacy and reducing the perceived democratic deficit may therefore have the opposite effect".

An even starker challenge comes from across the Atlantic:

> The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision-making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know the details of the decision-making process…This does not mean that people think no mechanism for government accountability is necessary; they just do not want the mechanism to come into play except in unusual circumstances (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002: 1-2).

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse summarise the orientations of American citizens as a preference for some kind of 'stealth' arrangement, whereby citizens know that democracy exists, but expect it to be barely visible on a routine basis – an attitude that they describe as naïve and unfeasible. The upshot of the *Stealth Democracy* study is that the authors criticise both the naïveté of popular attitudes towards politics, and the insistence of some observers that participatory democracy provides the solution to it. 'People need to understand that disagreements can occur among people of good heart and that some debating and compromising will be necessary to resolve these disagreements and come to a collective solution. As such, education designed to increase people's appreciation of democracy needs to be a crucial element of efforts to improve the current situation' (ibid: 10). The alleged benefits of participatory democracy are derided as 'wishful thinking', and they point out that research tends to reveal that it only works under very limited conditions. 'Deliberation will not work in the real world of politics where people are different and where tough, zero-sum decisions must be made…real deliberation is quite likely to

make them hopping mad or encourage them to suffer silently because of a reluctance to voice their own opinions in the discussion' (ibid: 207). Indeed, they cite a variety of research evidence to debunk three of the major claims of the participationists: that deliberative and participatory democracy produces better decision-making; that it enhances the legitimacy of the political system; and that it leads to personal development ('improves people').

Overall, these are bold and important claims that need further investigation in democratic societies, Britain included.

To summarise, those who regard democracy as a means to the realization of civic and community consciousness are highly likely to see parties as failing to foster this spirit or engage the necessary level of political participation by citizens. The sceptics doubt that the public has the interest or capacity to fulfil such participatory visions. Who is right about this is essentially an empirical question, which clearly points to a need for research in to popular attitudes towards and understanding of politics. More prosaically, parties are rarely now the political expression of social group identities, and the erosion of affective loyalty leaves them open to consumerist expectations that they should 'deliver' as public service providers. This brings us to the role of parties in government, which in turn hinges on the capacity of parties to act as mechanisms of popular choice, accountability and control.

Democracy as popular choice and control

Alan Ware argues that, even if participation and civic orientation are limited, and interests are not fully optimalized, democracy can be regarded as meaningful to the extent that it provides the opportunity for people to exercise a degree of choice and control over public affairs. Parties can be central to this. Ware identifies two distinctive approaches within this tradition. First, there are

democratic elitists such as Joseph Schumpeter who see 'popular control' as consisting of little more than the electorate's capacity to remove leaders when their governance is no longer wanted. This is probably the least demanding perspective in terms of party performance. In fact, parties may not even be strictly necessary to it, so long as there are rival candidates to contest the major elective offices of state. That said, parties are useful for democratic elitists in so far as they structure and organise the necessary process of electoral competition and perform the implicit function of recruiting candidates for office. Thus, democratic elitists should have no serious criticisms of contemporary parties, and one presumes they would regard phenomena such as the decline of party membership and partisan dealignment with relative equanimity. These things are not intrinsically crucial to democratic 'control' when understood as an electoral choice between governing teams. Arguably, however, they should be less sanguine about problems in aggregating group interests, for this is important to the provision of meaningful choice to voters.

There is a second approach to popular control, which imposes somewhat higher expectations on parties. Associated with E.E. Schattschneider (1942), this argues that meaningful democratic control can be exerted through mechanisms of popular choice such as parties, so long as they ensure a connection between the competing programmes put before the electorate and the policies a government implements. Do parties achieve this?

It is a common refrain of critics that parties fail to offer voters a meaningful choice, as they converge around a limited range of ideological or programmatic options. An interesting variant of this critique has been developed by Colin Hay (2007) who argues that the current political malaise among citizens owes much to the narrowing of political space in Britain around a neo-liberal consensus. This has impacted on the scope and ambition of the state by generating a

'depoliticization' of public life, incorporating 'privatization, the contracting out of public services, the marketization of public goods, the displacement of policy-making autonomy from the formal political realm to independent authorities, the rationalization and insulation from critique of neoliberalism as an economic paradigm, and the denial of policy choice' (Hay 2007: 159). These trends have been exacerbated by the narrowing of electoral competition which has been driven by the adoption of political marketing techniques by parties. The net effect of this has been to restrict the domain within which politicians may act, or articulate a convincing case for political action. This in turn simply serves to undermine the point of politics in the eyes of many citizens.

Note that in order to meet Schattschneider's criterion, parties must not only offer a choice of *programmes*, but they must also enact these programmes in such a way that they make a meaningful difference to policy *outputs*. This issue bears directly upon the issue of accountability, for if parties are fundamentally unable to shape public policy, who does (if anyone), and who should be held to account (if anyone)? It is an issue of obvious importance for democratic performance, then. It is of course well recognized that a variety of macro-social developments can seriously constrain the scope for autonomous action by party governments, including technological changes, demographic trends, social changes and economic cycles. The whole question of global economic constraints on national governmental autonomy has of course become one of the most insistent political themes of the contemporary era, and a highly vexed issue for politicians and intellectuals alike. The power of these implacable and impersonal forces can seem daunting, and they make it unsurprising that commentators should question the ability of parties to make any real difference. But what is the evidence?

First, do parties actually offer the electorate reasonably distinct *programmatic* alternatives, or are they so convergent as to render the idea of 'choice' meaningless (Hay's point)? Long-term manifesto analyses of shifting party ideologies demonstrate that ideological distance between the major UK parties tends to fluctuate. There have been times in the past few decades when the gap between Labour and the Conservatives has approximated a gulf, the early 1980s being the most obvious such occasion. However, more than one study shows that this gulf has diminished sharply since 1992, at least in terms of left-right ideology (Webb 2000: 113; Bara and Budge 2001: 28). Ideological convergence is particularly evident in matters of macro-economic management, and analysis of manifestos suggests that the long-term trend has been one of convergence in the UK (Caul and Gray 2001: 213-5). This should not lead us to the simplistic conclusion that there are no important differences between the major parties; it is not hard to demonstrate sharp contrasts over themes like constitutional reform, Europe or welfare policy in recent years, but it does suggest that those who struggle to discern the differences have picked up on something tangible.

The second issue here is whether or not the growing indistinctiveness of ideological emphases, at least in certain areas, renders insignificant party impacts on policy *outputs*. Since Richard Rose (1980) took the initiative in investigating this question, a number of scholars have researched the impact of British party governments in the context of their various constraints, and the general conclusion has that parties can and do continue to make a difference, at least to quantitative trends in public expenditure (Hogwood 1992; Klingemann et al 1994). Given the preponderance of single-party governments in the postwar era, Britain is precisely the sort of country in which one would expect to find a definite link between manifesto promises and government action. That said, this systematic research is in need of updating. Even so, two further points are worth

adding. First, quite apart the quantitative analyses, it is intuitively still obvious to most observers that parties can effect quite consisderable qualitative shifts in public policy once in power. One need only think of the Conservative governments' legislative initiatives on trade union powers or social and educational policy in the 1980s; similarly, New Labour's agenda of constitutional reform was less quantitative than qualitative in its implications for the British state, yet it was none the less profound for all that. Second, it should be borne in mind that the longer that parties are in power, the greater their policy impact is likely to be. As has often been pointed out, public policy tends to have a momentum of its own, and it can take considerable time and effort to change its direction. This fact may well explain an asymmetry in the party effects discovered by Klingemann et al (1994), in that the Conservatives have tended to have a greater impact on policy outputs when in office than Labour. When one bears in mind that, between 1945 and 1997, the Conservatives enjoyed 35 years in office compared to Labour's 17, including unbroken spells of 18 years and 13 years, compared to Labour's maximum incumbency of 6 years, it is readily apparent that until the Blair/Brown era, the former have experienced significantly greater opportunities for wielding long-term influence over the development of national policy. Since 1997, however, Labour has had its turn, and notwithstanding the fiscal caution of its early years in office, has increasingly come to resemble a classic Labour administration in terms of its proclivity for taxing and spending (and that is without taking into account the enormous interventions required by the current crisis in baking and finance).

Beyond the evidence of this political science research, it is useful to indulge in a simple counterfactual exercise: could one imagine that, had the Conservatives continued to rule since 1997, the British government would have enacted devolution, the Human Rights Act, incorporated the Social Chapter of the Treaty on European Union into British law, passed a one-

off windfall profits tax on privatized public utilities, legislated for new trade union rights and a minimum wage, increased expenditure on public services such as health and education to record levels, and so on? Surely not. It is even more counterintuitive to suggest that it would have made little difference if Thatcher or Callaghan had been Prime Minister after 1979.

In essence, therefore, the overall conclusion must be that, while there have undoubtedly been significant areas of policy convergence between the parties, they still remain central to the provision of meaningful and accountable governing choices in the UK. However, the (partly justified) perception of many voters that there are no great differences between the major parties probably contributes to the erosion of their popular standing. Where do such perceptions emanate from? Hay has argued that the politicians themselves have contributed through their depoliticization strategies, even if their motivations may have been genuine (2007: 157). Perhaps. But we cannot overlook the role of the mass media, which are the central mechanisms through which most citizens gain most of their information about politics. There have been a number of vocal critics of the role of the media in respect of the portrayal of politics in recent years, notably John Lloyd (2004) and Meg Russell (2005). Gerry Stoker has summarized this part of the debate in terms of four main lines of criticism: that the media 'dumbs down' politics by focusing on the 'immediate, the scandalous and the negative'; that it increasingly fuses reporting and opinion in a provocative way; that is actively spreads a 'culture of contempt', as exemplified by the type of encounter in which the interviewer's underlying if unstated question to the politician appears to be 'why is this bastard lying to me?'; and that the media place themselves above politics and democracy as self-appointed arbiter and judge (Stoker 2006: 128-9).

These criticisms are broad in scope, but they are not irrelevant to the widespread perception that parties cannot make a difference. Dumbing-down, trivialization, and generalized contempt all feed the sense that party politics cannot really achieve positive outcomes, and that consequently it matters little which of the major alternatives is in power. Stoker acknowledges the force of the first two lines of criticism of the media, but is less persuaded by the latter two. Indeed, it is not easy to think of ways in which one could systematically demonstrate the truth of the 'culture of contempt' phenomenon, let alone the 'self-appointed arbiter' accusation. Still, this does not mean they should be dismissed. Stoker argues that 'in so far as a culture of contempt is a deliberate product, it should be possible to correct it by changing editorial standards and not deifying those journalists that make their reputation by being constantly cynical about politics and politicians' (2006: 130). Quite, but this sounds like something that falls into the 'easier said than done' category. For a start, it would require acknowledgement that some journalists do work on such a basis, and that their impact is pernicious; then it would take an effort of will to impose self-restraint on the part of the media. The alternative of state-imposed restraint would probably do more harm than good, merely serving to reinforce the impression of a self-serving and censorious political elite. Whatever, the first implication of this part of the discussion is a need for further research into the nature of media effects on public opinion of politicians and politics.

Conclusion: Parties and democratic reform in the UK

Political parties in the UK, as elsewhere in the democratic world, attract many expressions of dissent and disapproval. With some reason they can be criticised for offering weaker participatory linkage than was once the case – certainly weaker than participationist visionaries would desire, in any case. It is unsurprising then that one of the major lines of criticism of party democracy in Britain is that it should be supplemented by substantial and radical new forms of

participatory or direct engagement by citizens. It is equally hard to make a case that political

parties are important to the building of community or civic orientations in the country, except in

the most banal sense. Any Rousseauan notion of 'community' can be dismissed as unrealistic

utopianism in a large, plural and modern industrial society, and the withering of social class

communities has further undermined any claims that parties might make to being expressions of

social group identities today.

But the British model of democratic party government is mainly premised on the notion that they

afford the citizenry a meaningful degree of choice between and control over political elites, in as

much as they foster accountability through elections. There are two particular problems which

emerge in this connection. First, parties suffer from the widespread perception that they fail to

offer sufficiently meaningful choice to voters, for one reason or another. For those on the left in

particular, this often comes down to the criticism that the major parties share in a neo-liberal

consensus which has narrowed the range of feasible policy options. I have suggested here that

this view may be somewhat simplistic and overlooks the ways in which parties continue to 'make

a difference', but this may be beside the point, for the fact is that the *perception* of diminished

political choice is probably widespread and this alone is enough to feed public cynicism about

party politics. This perception may in part derive from the words and actions of politicians

themselves, as Hay has suggested, but the mass media's portrayal of politics must be the

regarded as the critical (in both senses of the word) lens through which citizens see politics. This

raises questions of research design into media effects (notoriously challenging) and the

possibility of reform of the media (even more daunting!)

Paradoxically, the second problem emerges from what might appear to be a strength of party in

Britain. It is the degree of control that parties exert over state personnel and the legislative process. Since the parties remain sufficiently (though decreasingly) cohesive in parliament, single-party governments can get most of their legislative programmes enacted, thus redeeming most of their manifesto pledges. This enables voters to identify clearly the appropriate executive actors that should be held to account, and these actors can be rewarded or punished at the next election. However, the extent of party control over the state may be becoming part of the problem in terms of public perception and legitimacy. There is ample evidence that voters dislike the quangocracy, 'cronyism' or anything that strikes them as parties feather-bedding or entrenching their positions. The long-standing debate in Britain about the impact of the single-member plurality electoral system – which under-represents the Liberal Democrats in particular and serves as a high representational threshold to new parties – is one aspect of this, although it is not (yet) the case that a majority of voters wish to see proportional representation for Westminster elections. The growing recourse to state funding of parties – regarded as rent-seeking behaviour by parties some political scientists – is another, newer aspect. While the financial situation of parties in Britain is rarely healthy, and it is certainly possible to make a rational case for greater state support, there is little doubt that the public at large are hostile to the idea, regarding it is somehow 'sleazy' and self-regarding. Notwithstanding extensive reform of the regulatory framework of party funding in the UK in the past decade, and the efforts of the parties to extend this yet further in the near future (Phillips 2007), the warning of Peter Mair still seems apposite in this respect:

> On the ground, and in terms of their representative role, parties appear to be less
> relevant and to be losing some of their key functions. In public office, on the other
> hand, and in terms of their linkage to the state, they appear to be more privileged than

ever (Mair 1995: 54).

This suggests that reform efforts somehow need to focus on the perceived problems of excessive party control of the state – without undermining their capacity to enact promised legislative programmes. Such an agenda would take in matters of party funding, electoral reform and the process of making public appointments. Even so, while such reforms may be intrinsically worthy – and indeed, are on the governmental agenda - it is hard to believe that they would impact radically on public opinion. Neither is there yet convincing evidence to suggest a great appetite among citizens for a radical extension of participation, or that it would significantly improve public support for political elites and parties; after all, there are many countries around the democratic world where direct and participatory democratic practices already exist, but these have not prevented similar trends in public disaffection as those experienced by Britain.

Overall, this review suggest that political parties continue to make an important contribution to the functioning of democracy in the UK, but are more challenged and less appreciated for what they do. While they strive to find the reforms that will rectify the situation, I personally am doubtful that any which are envisaged will have a significant impact in the foreseeable future. This is perhaps because the roots of the apparent malaise are less institutional than attitudinal in nature, reflecting the changing nature of advanced industrial societies. The first task in gauging the truth and extent of this is to better understand citizen attitudes towards politics and participation, which is a challenge that research must take up.

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Notes

[1] Northern Ireland represents an exception to this trend, of course, since its major parties remain linked even now to segmented sub-cultures based on religion and national identity.

[2] The earliest research in Britain pointing to this loss of affective orientation towards parties was probably the classic work conducted by Goldthorpe et al on working class values in the 1960s, which suggested that 'affluent' workers bore a limited sense of communal loyalty or solidarity. While identifying themselves clearly as working class, most of these workers were discovered to have an 'individualist' or 'privatist' outlook. That is, where the 'traditional' worker was embedded in a set of mutually reinforcing life situations which predisposed him towards Labour (a socialisation process), the new affluent worker was more inclined to regard both the unions and the Labour Party in instrumental and calculative terms (Goldthorpe et al, 1969). Commitment to the Labour movement thus became more contingent.

[3] For a more detailed account and critique of the Power Inquiry's report, see Bale et al 2006, and Pattie and Johnston 2007.