new *lefts*

Is the Party Over?

New Labour and the
Politics of Participation

Paul Richards

FABIAN
SOCIETY

The Fabian Society

The Fabian Society is Britain's senior think tank. Concerned since its foundation with evolutionary political and economic reform and progressive social change, the Fabian Society has played a central role for more than a century in the development of political ideas and public policy on the left of centre. The Society is affiliated to the Labour Party but is editorially and organisationally independent. In recent years the Society's work on the modernisation of the Labour Party's constitution and its analysis of changing political attitudes have played a significant part in the renewal of the party's public appeal.

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New Lefts

The General Election of 1997 marked the end of a long period in which the ideology of the New Right dominated public life. Not just in the UK but throughout the world the intellectual credibility and popular appeal of neo-liberal conservatism have been undermined by economic and social failure.

But at the same time the left of centre has had to undergo a process of reinvention. The enduring commitments to social justice and to ideas of community, and the conviction that uncontrolled free markets cannot sustain the common good, hold fast. But changing social and economic circumstances force open new arguments and new visions. On the verge of a new century, as throughout its history, the Fabian Society seeks to engender debate on the future of the left.

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Contents

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Is the Party Over? is dedicated to the members of the Labour Party, whoever and wherever they may be.

The Labour Party..."must treat electors not as voting fodder, to be shepherded to a polling station, and then allowed to resume their slumbers, but as partners in a common enterprise." **R. H. Tawney**

1. Introduction – party politics in crisis?

If you're reading this Fabian pamphlet you are more than likely a member of a political party. That makes you a very rare breed indeed. Only three per cent of British voters are members of *any* political party, and only two per cent of Labour voters are members of the Labour Party. What is more, membership levels are falling. Some have seen this as indicative of a crisis of political parties, even suggesting that the party itself is on borrowed time. But are the days of mass political parties really over? If so, does it matter? And what can be done to strengthen and renew political parties for the 21st century?

Certainly, party membership has been falling since 1945, with a steady decline in those parties that were created as 'peoples' parties' – the mass socialist parties of Western Europe.[1] Although some mass parties have seen an increase in membership, such as the Social Democrats in Germany, these are the exceptions, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: Falling Party Memberships as a Percentage of Electorate

In the period between the beginning of the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, the percentage of the electorate who were members of a political party across Europe:

	1960	1990
Austria	26.2	21.8
Denmark	21.1	6.5
Finland	18.9	6.5
Italy	12.7	9.7
Netherlands	9.4	2.9
UK	**9.4**	**3.3**

Source: Daalder and Mair, 1983.

Across the world, the old political structures are under threat. The forces of mass communications and globalisation of the economy have rendered impotent traditional national institutions, governments and with them the parties that vie for office. We are living in a 'post-traditional society' – where traditions and traditional structures must adapt, engage and explain their worth in order to justify their continuing existence.

The institutions of civil society – parties, trade unions, charities, legal and financial institutions, large companies, local government, universities – were largely constituted in their present form in the century before last. Yet they are faced with, and often by-passed by, the emergent technologies and industries of the twenty-first century. As Charles Leadbeater says, we are 'fighting a modern war using cavalry'.[2]

Levels of trust in traditional institutions have plummeted. See for example the fall in the percentage of people saying they had confidence in the following institutions:[3]

Figure 2: Falling Trust in Traditional Institutions in Britain (in per cent)

	1983	1996
Police	83	58
Legal system	58	26
Church	52	25
Media	32	7
Trade Unions	23	14
Parliament	54	10

Source: The Henley Centre, 1997.

New technology is forging a social revolution as significant in its changes to the way we live, learn and work as the Industrial Revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Patterns of employment are transforming, with the rise of the 'no collar' worker – moving from job to job, contract to contract, with a portable portfolio of skills. Home working will become increasingly prevalent. Already 15 per cent of the population regularly buy goods over the Internet. By 2010, 40 per cent of households will contain only one person. We are fast becoming a society of individuals, interacting with one another through a nexus of real and virtual overlapping networks.

The conditions that enabled political parties to thrive – social homogeneity, immobility, and allegiance to class and community – have largely disappeared. Only 11 per cent of British city dwellers feel there is a sense of community

where they live.[4] Many organisations have suffered decline in recent decades – for example between 1971 and 1992 membership of the Women's Institute fell by a third, the Girl Guides by 29 per cent, the Boy Scouts by 11.2 per cent and St Johns Ambulance by 45 per cent. During the same period, church attendance has declined by 1.5 million. The forces of individualism hold sway, atomising societies and communities, while the forces of community and interdependence are in retreat.

The impact on political parties is profound. As power is sucked from local government and national parliaments and re-emerges in the decisions of multi-national companies and supra-national bodies, what is the point of canvassing for votes on the landings of a cold tower block in Salford or Sunderland? Or marching up and down the gravel driveways of Surrey for that matter? Can a Democrat in Michigan ever compete with Microsoft, or a National Party activist in Australia hope to make a difference?

How can political entities founded one hundred or more years ago possibly compete for the attention of a population which is better educated, housed, nourished and entertained than any in history? How can the local party branch meeting or fundraising Summer Ball compete with a trip to the multiplex or a couple of hours of *Tomb Raider*?

For many contemporary observers, the age of party politics is over. For them, the political parties of developed democracies have out-lived their usefulness. In a post-modern, Internet age, the political structures of the century before last are living on borrowed time. In the future, runs the argument, citizens will act as consumers to force corporations to change their policies, as members of pressure groups and single issue campaigns to force government action, and as participants in focus groups, referenda and electronic surveys to help our political elite construct their platforms. Politics will thrive, but party politics will wither and die. The activities of the campaigners in the 'Battle of Seattle', using the Internet to outwit the US Government, and the 'Carnival Against Capitalism' which brought London's financial centre to a temporary halt, show that the old traditions and methods hold no appeal for the new radicals. As Peter Drucker says:

'Now the parties are in tatters everywhere. The ideologies that enabled European parties to bring together disparate factions into one organisation to gain and control power have lost most of their integrating power. The parties and their slogans make no sense to voters, especially to younger ones.'[5]

Or this gloomy prognosis from Lawson and Merkl: 'the phenomenon of major party decline, often remarked in the context of the American political system, is becoming increasingly apparent in other political systems as well.'[6]

So is the party over? In this pamphlet I argue that mass political parties – and especially the Labour Party – can not only survive, but flourish. By turning outwards towards the local community, and engaging directly with its concerns, the party can build a base of support which is counted in millions and which includes all parts of the community. This will require structural and cultural changes: breaking down the bureaucracy and rigid geography of the organisation; and beginning to see all members – whatever their contribution – as central to the party's success.

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2. Origins and functions – what are parties for?

Origins

People engaged in politics have grouped together in various forms in every civilised society since the ancient Romans and Greeks. No matter what form political activity has taken, groups have coalesced around common geography, common ideas, or for the pursuit of common interests. The modern political party is a newcomer on the political stage, but has its roots in these various forms of groupings, cliques, and societies. The French social scientist Maurice Duverger points to the factions which divided the ancient republics, the troops surrounding the *condottiere* in Renaissance Italy, and the clubs of the French Revolution.[7] To these we might add the radical clubs and corresponding societies of eighteenth century England, the factions and coteries surrounding the rich and powerful men of the early nineteenth century, and the parliamentary groupings which became characterised as Whigs and Tories.

In some countries, parties developed from geographical groupings. The parties of the French Constituent Assembly of 1789 were founded on geographical lines before ideology. The deputies from Breton formed the 'Breton Club' which in turn became the Jacobins. In other countries, they have their roots in philosophical clubs and groups agitating against specific laws. Some parties are based on agricultural workers, such as the early Agrarian parties in Australia, Canada, Scandinavia, and central Europe. Duverger suggests that freemasonry had a role in the development of liberal parties in France and Belgium. In 1841, the Grand Master of Belgian Freemasonry launched a political party 'the Alliance.' The link between church and party cannot be ignored: the Christian-Democrat Parties and Catholic parties of Europe were founded by religious faiths.[8]

Parties in our modern sense are the result of the extension of the electoral franchise beyond cliques of men of wealth and property towards the mass of the people. In Britain this process was marked by a succession of reform acts, and particularly the 1867 Reform Act which extended the vote from 1,359,000 to 2,456,000 potential voters. The extension of the franchise meant that politicians at Westminster had to create electoral machines for the winning of votes in the country. The vote-gathering apparatus became established as a party to draw together supporters, to raise funds and to organise around a regular cycle of elections.

In Britain, the exception to the rule that parties were an extension of pre-existing parliamentary groups was the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 (which became the Labour Party after the election of 29

members in 1906). The Labour Party was a federation of extra-parliamentary bodies, mostly unions and trades councils, which amalgamated to form a party to break into parliament. It is also worth noting that the Conservative Party is more than simply a vote-gathering machine, spreading out from Westminster. In law, 'the Conservative Party' does not actually exist – it is a collection of different constituency associations, often centred on social clubs (such as the local 'Constitutional Club'), Conservative Central Office in Smith Square, and the parliamentary party.

The rise of socialist and social democratic parties in Europe is the result of a reaction against industrial capitalism and the failure of the pre-existing capitalist, conservative, agrarian or religious parties to represent or articulate the demands of the new industrial proletariat. Starting in the cities of Western Europe, socialism followed industrial capitalism across the globe. Labour Parties emerged throughout Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, with the German Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) founded in 1875, the French Parti Socialiste in 1905, the Swedish Social Democrats in 1889, the British Labour Party in 1900-06, and labour parties in Austria (1889), Belgium (1885), Denmark (1876-8), Holland (1894), Italy (1892), and Norway (1887).

In the United States of America, parties have existed since the founding of the nation, and although parties have risen and in turn been superseded, the two-party model has remained dominant. The Republican and Democrat parties in the States differ from their more homogenous European counterparts because they are not tightly organised ideological parties, but rather alliances of disparate local party groups and political factions. Their form of membership is different too. Unlike the 'standing armies' of the mass European parties, they call on 'reserve armies' of supporters who coalesce around particular candidates for particular elections, and then disperse – causing some to describe US parties as 'empty vessels'.

Different political systems, especially different forms of proportional representation, gave rise to different party systems. In Japan, one party is always predominant. In the USA and Britain, the two-party system dominates, with one or other party usually in Government (although in Britain we sometimes overlook the fact that we have had coalition governments for 43 out of the past 150 years, and governments reliant on the votes of another party for a further 34 years). In Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, France, Iceland, and the Netherlands there are between 3 and 5 relevant parties competing for office, and in Israel, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Switzerland there are more than five parties capable of forming part of a government.

The development of the party – different models

Parties appear in different guises at different times in modern history and in differing circumstances. Parties evolve and transmute. Broadly, they have developed in line with the following patterns:

Elite party

Elite parties were the small coteries based in representative assemblies, under pre-nineteenth century limited franchise democracies. They were small and undemocratic, with no need to appeal to a mass electorate, nor be accountable to a wide base of stakeholders. Their purpose was to seek out and win privilege and favour for their 'members'. Usually elite parties were operating alongside, or in competition with, monarchies and their attendant courts. In Britain, the Conservative and Liberal Parties grew from this tradition, whilst across Europe the traditional right-wing, religious and bourgeois parties owe their foundation to similar elitist social forces.

Mass party

The mass party is the traditional party model which has been the subject of the classic academic studies of party behaviour (Ostrogorski 1902, Michels 1915, Duverger 1951, McKenzie 1964) and serves as the benchmark for new forms of party organisation, challenges to the party and non-party movements. They needed to appeal to large electorates, they were representative, they were motivated by the desire to change society (or to resist change and conserve society), and were accountable, at least as part of their collective myth, to a mass membership. The great German SPD, which was founded in 1875 and had secured 35 per cent of the electorate by 1912, stands as the archetype of the 'mass' party. In this mould were cast the other mass socialist parties of Europe.

Catch-all party

Otto Kirchheimer advanced the concept of the *catch-all* party in the 1960s. He observed that the traditional party loyalties of the mass party were disintegrating as post-war society changed. The rise of the affluent society and changing patterns of work created voter de-alignment. Consumerism led individuals to become used to exercising choice. Ties of class and geography were becoming loosened, and so the old loyalties to class-based parties were starting to shake loose too. Kirchheimer cited the erosion of traditional social boundaries, the rise of mass media, and increasing affluence and welfare as the causes of a new type of elector, more willing to exercise rational choice than vote instinctively. Parties responded to this challenge by appealing beyond their traditional supporters, in order to 'catch-all' the support they could.[9]

The American party system most closely exemplifies the catch-all party. American political parties cannot rely on solid, immutable blocs of support. Instead they compete for votes in much the same way as competing brands of soap power, with voters swinging between parties at different elections. The role of

local party structures is subservient to the national campaigns focussing on individual candidates. New Labour has not only become a classic catch-all party but, on the evidence of the 1997 General Election and the broad base of its support, from millionaires in the City of London to former miners and steel-workers in Yorkshire, it has surpassed the expectations of Otto Kirchheimer writing 30 years ago.

Allied to Kirchheimer's model of a catch-all party is Angelo Panebianco's elec-toral-professional party (1988), where professional fundraisers, campaigners, marketeers, policy 'wonks' and career politicians run the show with little need for, or reference to, party members.

Cartel party

Richard Katz and Peter Mair argue that a new form of party is emerging – the cartel party. They contend that parties become agents of the state and exist purely to ensure their own survival. Members only serve to legitimise the myth of accountability and popular support. They are staffed by professional politi-cians and campaign consultants, and act in collusion with one another. State funding cements the parties into the architecture of the state. The cartel party is no longer a challenger, it becomes part of the state itself.

The model fails, however, to properly account for ideological differences and motivations, and ignores the motivation of millions of people who are active in politics. The theory works better in the American context, where the politics 'industry' has spawned thousands of professional spin-doctors, fundraisers and campaign strategists who are available to the highest bidder, regardless of party or ideological loyalty. Here politics continues the American tradition of 'guns-for-hire.'

Media party

The mass electronic media has given rise to a new type of party, based not on party structures and systems of internal democracy and representation, but ex-isting purely as a creature of the media, which can be characterised as the media party. A party image and platform can be constructed, and candidates can be put up, in order to secure broadcast coverage in an election period. Media parties are the preserve of the rich, because of the increasing costs of electioneering techniques.

The Referendum Party, established by James Goldsmith, is an example of this model. It secured just 2.7 per cent of the vote and no seats at the 1997 General Election, perhaps proving the need for campaigning structures on the ground as well as a media relations programme. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, dubbed by some technofascismo, also follows this model: 'a movement with neither party structure nor elected executive or responsibility, depending en-tirely on its leader Berlusconi for finance, policies and choice of candidates.'[10]

The Social Democratic Party (SDP) in Britain in the first half of the 1980s can also be seen as a media party – a political party with a national headquarters, a parliamentary grouping, significant establishment support, but with a small and dispersed membership – a head without a body. The failure of the SDP and other media-based political forces should serve as a dire warning to those who believe that the Labour Party can survive a major haemorrhage of members or a dislocation between the Government and party, or even a break with the trade unions.

The future – the communitarian party?
A new type of party is possible, drawing on the traditions of the mass party but recognising the changes in party loyalties and individual aspirations which gave rise to the catch-all party, and based on community activity and social entrepreneurship. This model, and the Labour Party's opportunity to evolve in this direction, is discussed in detail later in this pamphlet.

Functions
Political parties exist, and have proved durable political agencies in a variety of situations, because they perform several functions important to the functioning of representative democracy. Indeed, there are only two types of state where the party does not exist in some form or other: those countries that are ruled by families and monarchies, and those authoritarian regimes, particularly military governments, where political parties are proscribed.

The party today has many forms and different traditions and cultures, but in essence parties serve as a way of aggregating different political opinions and causes, winning and holding political power, and creating change in society in line with broadly held common beliefs. They act as a conduit between civil society and the state, provide a training ground for and a platform for political leaders, and help to make sense of complex, competing political demands by narrowing the field in debates and elections to a manageable number of protagonists. Parties, at their most basic, are organised opinion. There are exceptions even to this broad definition – the Peronist Party in Argentina united highly polarised sections of society – but for the majority of cases, it holds true.

These functions, some over-lapping and not necessarily present in all forms of party, include:

Contesting and winning elections
As we have seen, the rise of the party correlates to the spread of the franchise. Contesting and winning elections remains the primary purpose of a political party. It is extremely rare for a party to deliberately avoid contesting an election (as the Jamaican People's National Party did in 1983), or to refuse to take up office if elected (as Sinn Fein Members of Parliament do). Sometimes parties forget this primary purpose, and engage in other forms of activity such as inter-

nal debates or processes of renewal. The Labour Party in the early 1980s and the Conservative Party between the mid-1990s to the current day serve as examples.

Making democracy work

Political parties aggregate interests and opinions, and share the costs of fighting elections and organising political activity. By aggregating disparate political views and strands of opinion, political parties 'make sense' of democracy. Parties are coalitions of opinion. The production of party programmes and manifestos, based on broad-band systems of values, means that voters can exercise choice in elections. Without parties, every issue would be represented by individual candidates. Although 'parties-as-coalitions' help voters to make rational choice in elections, the disadvantage (especially in two-party systems) is that minority voices can be lost, and that on matters of conscience such as the death penalty and abortion, individual candidates' views may not be exposed. Also because parties are coalitions, they are prey to internal disputes and factionalism: witness the Tories' current fratricide over Europe. But without parties, democracy would not function, and where party systems are weak, such as in the United States, the result is often gridlock.

Making parliament work

Parties allow parliamentary governments to be formed and sustained, and introduce a degree of stability into politics. Where many parties are competing for office, systems can be more unstable. For example, in Ireland it took seven weeks to form a Government after the 1992 election, and Italy has had more than fifty governments since the Second World War. But without parties, stable Government drawn from individual delegates or representatives would be impossible.

Allowing access to politics

Parties are a bridge between local communities and individuals and the institutions of the state. They allow access to power for people who are excluded in every other way. Many of the world's most famous political leaders came from socially excluded backgrounds. Parties also allow ordinary people a say in policy-making and political discussion, and this remains a central role for local Labour parties in any future arrangements. Political parties can create a platform on which people can stand, and live out their potential.

The history of the British Labour Party is bursting with such examples, from Keir Hardie, Ernest Bevin and Ellen Wilkinson, to many of today's political and trade union leaders. Parties, and particularly parties of the left, have allowed political leaders and statesmen and women to emerge from social backgrounds that denied them opportunities in other spheres. But political parties are not simply passive conduits for talent: they also serve to recruit and train future leaders, both locally and nationally.

Giving a platform for ideas

Through political parties, new ideas can be tested and debated, and put into practice. The progression of ideas emanating from think tanks such as the Fabian Society, or the Adam Smith Institute, from policy pamphlet to Act of Parliament, is well documented. Parties also give a platform for the common sense of ordinary people. Successful local schemes and initiatives can be spread and shared. Through the policy-machinery and representative party structures, local views can be articulated to national leaders and governments.

Making change

The purpose of progressive, radical and socialist parties is to change society. This function is often overlooked by academics and political scientists – but no one in the German SPD, French PS, African National Congress, or British Labour Party joined in order to 'make parliament work' or 'aggregate political opinions'. They joined because they believed their political party could change their society and build a better future, and in the words of Richard Crossman serve as a 'battering ram for change'.

Political parties, especially on the left, are not just about form and function, they are about hopes and dreams, and even life and death, which is why regard to the sensibilities of the Labour Party membership must be given by the party's national leaders.

3. Challenges to the traditional party

Political parties are the product of particular forms of society and electoral systems. As traditional forms of society and politics evolve, so traditional party structures and activity are challenged. Parties are challenged by changes in the world economy, the death of traditional industries and the changing patterns of work and employment, and the globalisation of finance and communications.

These sweeping transformations to the economy and civil society threaten not just the form and traditions of political parties but all other political institutions, including the fundamental building block of modern democracy, the nation state. Some have argued that the response to the globalisation of the economy should be the globalisation, or at least the 'continentalisation' of politics. For example Mark Leonard for Demos has argued that for the European Union to work, political parties must become pan-European, and even multinational.[11]

Below the macro-economic and societal changes, political parties are buffeted by a dislocation of traditional loyalties and alignments, coupled with a breakdown in trust in political parties, politicians, and even politics.[12] The challenges to political parties can be characterised as the following:

A distrust in politics

People don't trust politicians. Politicians tend to rank alongside journalists and estate agents in surveys of trustworthiness. Contributory factors might include the decline of deference to all authority figures, from teachers to bank managers; the perceived powerlessness of politicians to make real change; and a string of sexual and financial scandals for which politicians have no one to blame but themselves.

Corruption scandals in Italy, Japan and Germany, the Neil Hamilton, Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken cases in Britain, and the Monica Lewinsky trial in the USA have all served to taint the image of politicians in general as venal and corrupt. In 1964 in the USA, 76 per cent of people surveyed, when asked how much of the time 'do you trust the Government in Washington to do the right thing?' answered 'all' or 'most of the time'. By 1994, the figure had fallen to 25 per cent. Surveys in 1981 and 1990 covering eleven European countries showed that confidence in government had declined in six countries, was low but stable in four, and had risen only in Denmark.[13]

A breakdown in voters' loyalties

The decline of traditional patterns of employment and work, and the concomitant breakdown of class identification, has had a major impact on mass parties which draw on class-based support. This is particularly true of Labour. Back in

1979, Eric Hobsbawm understood the implications for a Labour Party faced with such changes in voting behaviour:

> 'The future of Labour and the advance of socialism depends on mobilising people who can remember the date of the Beatles' break-up and not the date of the Saltley pickets; of people who have never read Tribune and who do not care a damn about the deputy leadership of the Labour Party...the future... depends on men and women, blue-collar, white-collar and no collar, ranging from zero CSE to PhD, who regrettably are not revolutionary even though they want a new and better Britain.'[14]

Since Hobsbawm's prescient words 20 years ago, the process has accelerated. Voters do not automatically give their loyalty to one party at every election. In 1964, 43 per cent 'identified strongly' with either the Labour or Conservatives, but by 1979 only 26 per cent did so. By 1992 this had fallen to less than 20 per cent. In 1997, ICM's eve of poll survey showed only 19 per cent of those voting Labour were 'reliable' supporters. The days when parties could rely on 'natural' support are largely over. No party can take its vote for granted.

Strong pockets of geographical support remain, of course. For Labour, in the inner-cities and in Scotland and Wales; for the Tories in the home counties of England, and for the Liberal Democrats in the South West. But recent election results, especially the 1997 General Election, show that every seat is a marginal seat. Swings were not uniform – seats such as Enfield Southgate and Billericay saw 18 per cent swings from Tory to Labour, well above the national average. Labour won seats in true-blue county areas as well as in the cities. Yet New Labour can also lose. Labour councils in 'core' Labour areas like Islington, Liverpool and Sheffield have been lost to the Liberal Democrats.

Other parties have suffered shocks to their pre-eminence. In Sweden in 1991, the Social Democrats share of the vote declined by 5.5 per cent – the biggest swing against it since 1944. In the USA, the Republicans lost a larger proportion of the vote than at any time since 1968. In France in 1993, the Socialist Party's vote collapsed on an unprecedented scale, and in Britain in 1997, the Conservatives' share of the vote was their lowest since 1832. Across the democratic world, the blocs of electoral support upon which the old parties could rely, are fracturing. The lesson is that every voter is now a swing voter, every seat a marginal.

Declining turnout, party membership and levels of activity

In some elections in Britain, the turnout has reached desperate proportions. On June 10 1999, turnout in the Leeds Central by-election fell to 19.6 per cent of the electorate. In the European elections on the same day, turnout was a dismal 23.3 per cent. At one polling station in Sunderland, only 15 voters out of a possible 1000 bothered to vote. And it should be remembered that, despite the landslide in the 1997 General Election, the turnout was the lowest since 1935.

As we have seen, party membership figures have fallen since the 1950s, with political parties reduced to rumps in areas where they do not poll many votes. The Conservative Party has seen a pronounced fall in members, and an increasingly elderly membership. The party has been losing 64,000 members every year since 1960.[15] This will continue with the removal of many of the support mechanisms for local membership retention in constituencies, such as a local MP, councillors, or paid party agents.

For Labour the picture is not as grim, but should still give cause for concern: every year a third of those who lapse from membership do so simply because no one has called to collect their subscription. Some 40 per cent of members do not renew their subscriptions after the first year.

Within the falling membership of political parties there is a declining level of active participation. Party members are more likely to donate funds and stay at home than be activists. Seyd and Whiteley's study of 'new Labour' members – those who joined between 1994 and 1997 – shows that this group are 28 per cent less likely to be active in party activities and electioneering.[16] Their comparable study of the membership of the Conservative Party shows a similar decline in levels of activity (and the survey was conducted with the Tories still in Government and before their electoral collapse in 1997).

The rise of non-party politics

Parties inspire distrust and even hostility. Every canvasser knows the bitter frustration of the member of the public who declares that they are 'not voting' as though it was something of which to be proud. In the United States, parties have inspired such distrust that anti-party laws have been introduced, for example prohibiting parties from contesting local council elections. In many parts of the UK, Conservatives stand for local elections as 'independents' or 'ratepayers'. Some parties avoid the name 'party' – for example the Northern League in Italy and the Gaullists in France, and perhaps even 'New Labour' in Britain. In 1993 in Hamburg, an organisation won an election under the name 'Instead of Party'. In many jobs, being a member of a political party is frowned upon, and in some, such as local government in Britain, being a party office-holder can be illegal.

The failure of political parties to successfully aggregate all shades of opinion, and their institutional conservatism when confronted by new social movements, has led to non-party politics. The women's movement by-passed what it saw as patriarchal party structures. Ethnic minority groups eshew what they consider to be racist mainstream parties. Single issue concerns such as AIDS awareness, opposition to genetically modified organisms, campaigns to cancel third world debt, opposition to road building and airport programmes, have all been articulated via non-party structures. The Snowdrop campaign for gun controls in the mid-nineties secured its objectives within weeks of Labour being elected.

14

As mainstream parties seek to 'catch-all' votes and appeal to broad sections of the electorate, the voices of minorities can be ignored. Mainstream parties fear controversy or alienating their supporters, and thus tend to strike positions towards the political centre.

The rise of consumer power is taken more seriously by corporations wishing to maintain market share than the representations of elected governments. Food suppliers' reaction to the BSE scare owed more to customers' fears than the Government's scientific evidence. A company like Shell can have its reputation shaken by the well-orchestrated international efforts of Greenpeace. The mighty MacDonalds can be humbled by a small group of environmental protesters fighting them in the courts.

Within institutions, corporate decisions and practice can be altered by institutional stakeholders. Shareholders in financial institutions and members of Building Societies can campaign for changes in the way they are run. The decision of the British Government to block the sale of Manchester United football club to BSkyB in 1998 owed much to the campaign of Shareholders United Against Murdoch (SUAM).

The rise of politics on the Internet means that traditional party structures can be side-stepped altogether. Vast numbers of activists, on an international scale, can be mobilised and co-ordinated at virtually no cost and in a matter of minutes.

Of course, pressure groups are nothing new in British politics. The Anti-Corn Law League, the Chartists and the Suffragettes were pressure groups. However, people wanting to campaign for change continue to ignore political parties as their vehicle if they feel parties do not represent their views, and will create new forms of protest, representation and campaigning.

4. Learning from others – opportunities for parties

Although traditional parties and other established institutions are experiencing falling memberships, declining levels of activism, and a collapse in trust, some organisations are bucking this trend by attracting new support and loyalty. The bleak picture of a world predominantly inhabited by people living alone, largely working from home, doing their shopping and socialising on the Internet, where the binds of community and family have been severed, is not necessarily a true reflection of the future.

First, despite all the problems they face, political parties have proved capable of surviving different social changes, transformations in patterns of voting and adapting to political changes. The traditional parties have brushed off the challenger parties, such as Greens and Nationalists, snapping at their heels.

Some of Labour's sister parties, despite relative decline, enjoy huge memberships. The Swedish Social Democrats and the German SPD both have memberships of over one million. Despite the fall in the proportion of the electorate who are members of political parties cited at the start of this pamphlet, in some countries membership has increased since the 1960s. In Belgium and Germany, the percentages of the electorate whoare members of a political party between 1960 and 1990 have increased from 7.8 per cent to 9.2 per cent, and from 2.7 per cent to 4.2 per cent, respectively. In Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden the *absolute* number of party members has also increased.

The pattern of post-war politics in Europe has opened up government for the majority of political parties, thus moving even the small newcomers into the heart of the system, with the concomitant benefits and legitimacy. Small parties in Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden have held office within coalitions.

There has also been a growth in party organisation and fundraising. The number of staff employed by political parties between the 1960s and 1980s has increased by 61 per cent in Austria, 112 per cent in Denmark, 140 per cent in Italy, 268 per cent in Germany, and 330 per cent in Ireland. Party fundraising income has increased over the same period, by 286 per cent in Austria, 145 per cent in the United States, and 350 per cent in Germany.

In countries emerging from dictatorship, where democratic systems have been introduced, party systems have been established. The party-movements such as Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia and the Solidarity Citizens' Committees in Poland that overthrew Communist governments succeeded in drawing broad coalitions. Their leaders Havel, Michnik and others argued for non-party forms of

16

action after they had assumed power. Yet in less than two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, more traditional forms of party had emerged.

For the left, the world view is encouraging. Socialist and social democratic parties are in government in twelve European Union countries, including for the first time, the big four: Germany, Italy, Britain, and France. In the USA, the Democrats have enjoyed a long period in office, and may even achieve a third term. There is also a convergence of politics on the left, with the Third Way (Britain, USA), the 'polder model' (Holland), the 'gauche plurielle' (France) and the 'Neue Mitte' (Germany).

Second, non-traditional forms of political activity, especially pressure groups and campaigning networks and organisations, have attracted support. Organisations concerned with environmentalism have seen a marked increase in membership. The memberships of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have grown from 50,000 in 1971 to 550,000 by the mid-nineties. By 1997 the membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) stood at over a million.

The new joiners are not all radical campaigners: The National Trust was founded in 1895 and by 1905 had just 500 members. By then end of the Second World War this had grown to 800. Yet by 1997 the National Trust had 2.5 million members – more than all UK political parties put together. In Surrey, one in seven members of the population are paid-up National Trust members. If one in seven people in rock-solid Labour areas were Labour members it would give party memberships of, for example, 22,000 in Preston, 34,000 in Lewisham, and 89,000 in Glasgow!

The Social Trends Survey shows consistently high levels of charitable and voluntary activity in British society: in 1998 one in five people said they had done unpaid charitable work in the previous year. One in six people had actively engaged in a consumer boycott. The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering produced by the Institute of Volunteering Research showed that volunteering had increased between 1981 and 1991, although it had decreased between 1991 and 1997. And research in 1992 showed high levels of 'protest' activity, with 15 per cent of the population claiming to have attended a protest meeting, 5 per cent saying they had been on a protest march, and 63 per cent saying they had signed a petition.

What these various indicators point to is that large numbers of the British people are:

- 'joiners' of organisations;
- willing to engage in voluntary activities; and
- involved in non-party politics, including protests.

This is not to say that there are vast crowds just waiting to be marshalled into

17

party activity, but it does mean that the perennial excuses that 'people aren't interested' or that 'people are apathetic' will not do. The challenge for the political parties, and especially Labour, is to tap into these characteristics which already exist, and channel the energies of these sizeable groups into party political activity.

Successful membership organisations in the twenty-first century will:

- reflect values and attract support around specific policies;
- provide tangible benefits of membership, either personal benefits or feel-good 'altruism'; and
- utilise data-basing, personal profiling and tracking technology to provide personal services to members.

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5. Lessons for New Labour

There is little point in a Fabian pamphlet discussing the future of the political party without reference to the Labour Party. Socialists match analysis and ideas to practical application and action, and this pamphlet aims to promote debate inside the Labour Party and the wider movement about the future of the party – its organisation, and its membership. So, in the face of these new realities and from an understanding of the changes in society and individuals' perceptions and aspirations, what should Labour do now?

The first lesson must be that Labour must be prepared to learn from other organisations, here and around the world, including non-political organisations, and even organisations with which we may have little sympathy.

If New Labour were a business, the first thing any assessment of its prospects would include is a SWOT analysis: a thumbnail sketch of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats facing an organisation. The SWOT analysis in Figure 3 (see overleaf) shows that New Labour is in a strong position, with a sound basis for Government and an enfeebled Opposition, but there is no room for complacency. If the newspapers are to be believed part of the Prime Minister's holiday reading in 1999 was George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Dangerfield tells the story of the Liberal Party – elected with a landslide in 1906, confronted by a collapse in every certainty they espoused, and within years condemned never to hold office again. The only thing certain in politics is that nothing is certain.

The next area to survey is the current form and function of the Labour Party, and to answer the question: what does local Labour do?

The core functions of a local Labour Party can be broken down as follows:

- To renew and sustain itself, recruit and retain new members;
- To welcome new members;
- To encourage members to become active in the party;
- To identify and encourage party candidates;
- To provide training;
- To keep in touch with the wider community;
- To campaign;
- To raise funds; and
- To present the Labour Party as a professional organisation.[17]

It is against these functions that the existing structure and culture must be measured. This is of course the ideal. The balance between these competing

Figure 3: A SWOT analysis of New Labour

Strengths

Labour is in Government with a parliamentary majority of 180 and remains high in the opinion polls.

Labour's core values are widely shared by the British people; the party is trusted.

Membership rocketed between 1994 and 1997.

Tony Blair is a popular, trusted Prime Minister and electoral asset.

Weaknesses

Labour's electoral support is fragile – what the voters gave in 1997, they can take away.

Labour has a local structure unchanged since the early twentieth century.

Party membership is declining, albeit from a high base.

Opportunities

It is possible for Labour to win the next General Election, enjoying a full consecutive second term for the first time.

The Tories are currently unelectable; they may stay that way for a decade or more.

By delivering its manifesto and beyond, Labour can create a progressive coalition for a progressive century.

Threats

It is possible for Labour to lose the next General Election, as in 1951, 1970, and 1979.

The Tories can re-group and win.

Much of Labour's support and goodwill could evaporate in an economic downturn.

Labour is perceived to have failed to deliver its pledges.

The 'new Labour' membership might desert the party, swinging the party to 'old Labour'.

functions, and the time and importance given to each varies from constituency to constituency. The balance between, say, training and fundraising against routine party business is usually out of proportion to the value of these tasks.

The most important contextual point is that the Labour Party is now in Government, and therefore many of its campaigning political activities are no longer in the context of 'Beating the Tories'. Local Labour's job with the party in Government is very different from when the party is in Opposition. Past Labour Governments have been marked by major falls in membership. Between Harold Wilson's first election win in 1964 and his defeat in 1970, party membership fell from 600,000 to 300,000. The task is to keep members involved and informed, and to give them a real stake in the success of the party in Government, as well as incentives for activity.

Redefining activists

The problem with Labour's internal workings is that it is very difficult to participate in a light way. Labour members tend to fall into one of two camps – 'hyper-activists' (about ten per cent of the party) who do everything, and 'stay-at-homers' (the rest) who do nothing, but may emerge at General Elections. Often the latter group includes those who have been the former – but having put in hours every week as a branch officer or GC delegate, feel they have 'done their bit' and want their evenings back.

It may be a cliché, but still true, that a new member showing up at a branch meeting finds it hard to leave without becoming the branch political education officer, the delegate to the GC, and being given a leafleting round. By contrast, once an active member fails to attend one or two meetings in a row, they can be ravaged by guilt and prefer to stay away permanently.

A new culture is needed, where more members perform more tasks, lightening everybody's load, and where people can participate at a variety of levels, in ways of their own choosing. If such participation were possible, more people would participate, and the virtuous circle would continue. If a member wants their sole contribution to local Labour all year to be to bake a cake for the tombola, or host a cheese and wine evening every other year, then that contribution should be seen as welcome and as important as the comrade who wants to be conference delegate or council candidate.

The myth of policy-making

Throughout its history, the Labour Party has struggled with the question of who makes policy in the party. The easy answer is the members. But the real answer is far more complex. Some of Labour's bitterest rows have been caused by rifts between Labour Governments and Labour members over the direction of policy. Members have failed to understand the actions of Governments. Governments have failed to listen to members. Labour's *Partnership in Power* changes are designed to prevent that mistake ever being made again.

21

Under the old system, party branch meetings passed resolutions, which passed to the General Committee. Every year, one resolution and one amendment were allowed to be sent by a local party to annual conference. All the resolutions were then 'composited' and, with scissors and paste, new resolutions would be created, which no local party had seen.[18] Debates then took place, where complex issues such as Northern Ireland, international affairs, economic policy, and the environment would be dealt with in half an hour with a series of three-minute speeches. From the earliest days of the party, either covertly or overtly, Labour Prime Ministers and Governments have largely ignored the deliberations of Labour Party conference. Under the old system the idea that members made policy was a myth – in fact policy was decided by a small oligarchy of Labour's trade union and parliamentary leaders.

By moving towards a rolling programme of policy documents and the more deliberative approach of the National and local Policy Forums, Labour has modernised its policy-formulation processes. Members can now have a direct say. Local expertise can be brought in. Instead of a debate about the health service being dominated by the same old faces, local GPs and nurses can be asked to attend the health policy forum and share their experience. Policy forums involve members who were turned off by the traditional meetings, and involve new members who want to have their say. Members should be allowed to discuss, debate and 'buy into' policy documents, especially the Manifesto, through OMOV ballots such as the Road to Manifesto process before the 1997 election. The spread of the Internet will enable all members to access information and documents, and discuss them with others without leaving their homes. This direct say forms an important incentive for members' continuing involvement. More work must now be done to involve greater numbers of members in policy forums, to make the work of the national policy forum more transparent, and to build on the early successes.

The role of local campaigning

Part of the theory of decline of political parties is that local constituency election campaigning is a pointless, ritualistic activity designed to make local parties feel engaged, but with a negligible effect on the results. The proposition is that elections are won on the television, radio and in the press, with national campaigning being the most important vehicle for a party's message.

Those involved in campaigns have always believed that local activity makes a difference to election outcomes. The Herculean efforts of party stalwarts at election times are driven by a firm belief that campaigning matters. Elections are not just won on the *Jimmy Young Show* and GMTV; they are won in the shopping centres and on the estates as well.

In recent years this common sense view has been bolstered by studies which confirm the view that local campaigns do have an effect. Research into the

1992 General Election by David Denver and Gordon Hands resulted in four conclusions: that national party machines are concentrating their resources on local campaigns, centred on 'key seats'; that the strength of campaigns varies with the size of the local majority; that the Labour Party was best at targeting 'key seats'; and that performance by Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates was significantly affected by the intensity of their local campaigns.[19] Their research into the 1997 General Election showed that these trends had accelerated.

Similarly, the famous study *Labour's Grassroots* by Seyd and Whiteley in 1992 showed that local Labour parties have a significant effect on election results. They conclude:

> 'Party members and political activists play a very important role in mobilising the vote for the Labour Party in General Elections. Moreover, their influence is independent of other factors which determine voting behaviour. We can be confident that a thriving local constituency party is an electoral asset to the Labour Party as a whole.'[20]

The success of Labour's key seat strategy in the 1997 General Election proves that such targeting of resources yields results. The first-past-the-post system means that a tiny proportion of voters determines the outcome of the election, and these voters are the ones that the party machines target. In 1997, about 70,000 voters determined the result – just 0.25 of electorate. This leads parties to concentrate effort in a minority of areas and reduce effort in 'safe' seats. But by neglecting safe Labour areas, the 'core' vote may decline; by doing the same in 'enemy territory', local parties may wither on the vine. The introduction of proportional representation for the European elections means that every vote counts, and the Labour Party must be as active and successful in Buckinghamshire as Barnsley.

23

6. Five ideas for reform

There has been a debate about reforming the structure of the Labour Party for as long as there has been a Labour Party. In the very year of the Labour Representation Committee's birth, a committee was established to look into the structure of the party, and it has been sitting in one form or another ever since! At times the debate has been about efficiency and effectiveness, at other times it has been about fundamental socialist principles.

Four years before the Labour Representation Committee was founded, the *Labour Annual 1897* stated:

> 'Of vigorous Agitation and Education, we have no lack. But of Organisation there is far too little. The simplest organisation is the most effective. Never seek to multiply "fancy" councils, committees, and offices. Your best men are worn threadbare with mere officialdom. Meetings should begin punctually. All squabbling and discussion of side issues should be rigidly suppressed.'

Alas for the past hundred years this sound advice has all too often been ignored.

Commissions such as those chaired by Harold Wilson in 1955 and Bill Simpson in 1967 were concerned with electoral efficiency. The Wilson Report contained the famous description of Labour as 'still at the penny-farthing stage in a jet-propelled era.'

For Tony Benn and his supporters in the late 1970s and early 1980s, party reform was a necessary precursor to the establishment of a socialist state. Unless the parliamentary leadership could be brought under the control of small groups of left-wing activists in the unions and constituencies, future Labour Governments would inevitably fail in the face of international capitalism. Like Leon Trotsky, the Bennites believed that the crisis of socialism was a crisis of leadership.

Fabians have always been part of the debate. In 1962, the Young Fabians published *The Mechanics of Victory*, which argued for a more powerful General Secretary, 'all aspects of the Party's publicity to be strengthened and co-ordinated under a high-powered Director of Information', and an increase in subscriptions.[21]

Ben Pimlott writing in 1971 argued that 'The Labour Party is withering away at the grassroots' and put the case for structural reforms based on the premise that 'CLPs should not be allowed to exist as organisations whose only function is to fulfil the psychological needs of their members.'[22] In 1977 Dianne Hayter stated that 'a large dynamic, healthy party is a pre-condition for socialism.'[23]

For Labour modernisers in the eighties and nineties, party reform was a way of proving to a sceptical electorate that Labour was a serious contender for Government. The modernisers' case was that a party which could take tough decisions about itself could take them about Britain. The tough decisions included passing power to the membership, by-passing the activists' structures in policy-making, introducing One Member One Vote in key party elections and reform of the party NEC and conference. The modernising pressure group the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) organised a Commission on Party Democracy in1995 which produced a report recommending a 'party of individual members' rather than 'a party of committees and other obscure representative structures.[24]

Tony Blair marked the early phase of his leadership with party reforms – changing Clause IV using an all-member ballot, and putting the party's election manifesto to a party referendum. The post-election party conference in 1997 introduced reforms to the NEC and consolidated the role of policy forums.

There is no shortage of criticism of Labour's internal structures and culture, and such criticism has always existed.[25] In 1999, a senior party official produced a paper, subsequently leaked to the media, in which he described the party's structure as akin to a franchise of Trotter's Independent Traders. For some, criticism of party activity is now a badge of modernisation. The danger, however, is that such modernising zeal forgets that the people and *modus operandi* they are criticising are often the people who kept the party alive during the dark days of Thatcherism and who deliver Labour support come election time. Often the loudest critics are people who are never to be seen at a by-election or staffing a street stall. The job now is to start imagining what the Labour Party should be like instead of complaining about its faults.

The reforms of the past ten years have given more opportunities for influence and passed key decisions, like the election of the NEC and agreeing the manifesto, to individual members. But in essence the local structure of the Labour Party has remained unaltered since before the Second World War. If Ramsey MacDonald or Arthur Henderson were to stroll today into the General Committee of most constituency Labour Parties, they would find very little had changed.

The tension at the heart of the debate is between those who see Labour as a federation, and those who see it as a membership organisation. This tension is the result of the history and structure of the party. Labour was founded as a federation. Then it became a federation with individual members.

By 1906 there were about one hundred, small local Labour Representation Committee local branches. It was not until 1932, when the party had been in Government twice, that the whole of the UK was covered by Labour Party branches. But during its first century, the affiliated parts of the federation, mostly the trade unions, held all the power, including 90 per cent of the votes at Labour

Party conference. However, towards the end of Labour's first hundred years, the balance had swung towards the individual members, with the end of the block vote and the introduction of OMOV.

Yet the party's schizophrenia remains. It may be entirely within the rules that the affiliated bodies of the London Labour Party should vote in the selection for the Labour candidate for London Mayor. Yet for many observers, giving votes to the shoppers in the Co-op and members of the Woodcraft Folk, who may be Tory voters, seems a process more redolent of old, not new Labour.

With the *Twenty-first Century Party* consultation exercise in the first half of 2000, there is now a recognition from the top that local party structures must be modernised. The party is caught in a difficult Catch-22. There is little demand for reform from the hard-core of Labour activists – the people who spend one, two or more evenings every week engaged in party meetings. This layer of hyper-activists, perhaps only ten per cent of Labour's total membership, consists of those with the time and inclination to pursue such activity. They enjoy the endless round of meetings, minutes and agendas. It provides purpose and, for some, a sense of importance.

In 1966 Ian Aitken wrote that the Labour Party meeting 'separates the genuine enthusiasts from the mere dilettantes' with a 'dull but essential recital of minutes, correspondence, secretary's and treasurer's reports, bazaar committee reports, jumble sale plans and so forth.' [26] Not much has changed in the next thirty years.

The vast bulk of membership are not interested in such activity and, for fear of being 'elected' branch officers or being given leaflet rounds for simply showing their face, stay at home. Yet the mechanics of party consultation involves asking the activists, rather than the stay-at-home members. Perhaps the *Twenty-First Century Party* consultation should target members who do *not* regularly attend meetings.

The consultation is vitally important to the success of Labour, and its findings must be used as the start of a far-reaching programme of reform. As the party leadership considers reforms of local structures and the membership starts to imagine a party in this new century, here are five ideas for reform.

Turn the party inside out

The Party is essentially inward-looking. Meetings with other Labour Party members are the normal activity. Indeed, the definition of a Labour activist is one who attends Labour Party meetings. A Labour-supporting Justice of the Peace or school governor is not considered an activist. Someone who fails to turn up to branch meetings is deemed to have dropped out even if they spend their time raising money for Oxfam, writing letters for Amnesty, sitting on a NHS Trust Board, and serving as a trade union shop steward. Even Labour councillors,

spending hours with council work, are criticised for missing meetings. In reality, sitting through nine or ten hours of Labour Party meetings every week is glorious inactivity – and advances the cause not one iota. Local parties are sometimes invisible to the local community, and hard for people to contact. Until recently, many local Labour parties were not even listed in the phone book. It is within living memory that prospective members in some areas were told the local party was full. In the past, joining the Labour Party has been harder than joining the Garrick.

Social change cannot be brought about simply by changing one set of political leaders for another. Top-down change, such as the reforms being introduced by the Labour Government, must be complemented and encouraged by bottom-up change. There is a need for extra-parliamentary activity to consolidate the Government's advances, win support for Labour's new laws and initiatives, and to drive the Government's agenda ever onwards. Extra-parliamentary activity is not anti-parliamentary activity; nor is it simply lobbying the Government with petitions and demonstrations. This approach is a world away from the 'pavement politics' of the local Liberal Democrats, which is based on opportunism and cynicism, and usually conducted in exclusion from other forms of political power.

With the Labour Party in Government, the Labour Party in the country should be a battering ram for change. Local Labour should become active in a variety of spheres, from bolstering and supporting existing local campaigns and concerns, by teaming up with other organisations and groups to campaign on local issues, and by providing a focal point and catalyst for local people wanting to make a change with their voluntary effort. More than this, the local Labour Party should act as the platform for social entrepreneurs – those individuals wanting to create new schemes, initiatives and businesses which serve not to generate profit but to generate change.

This requires big, active, diverse and energetic local Labour Parties, with roots deep in the local communities and regions, with local co-ordination of members though branches and a large degree of local autonomy over the selection of candidates, local priority-setting and decision-making. It means that the Labour Party in the future must transcend its founding purpose of simply seeking representation in Parliament, and also seek to make a reality of its socialist credo in Clause IV.

By proving that change is possible through collective action, local Labour can 'pre-figure' the kind of society socialists want to see realised. Pre-figuration makes good sense – it just takes a lot more hard work. A party resolution condemning homelessness may help local Labour Party members feel better; a social initiative like the *Big Issue* makes homeless people feel better. By proving that 'something can be done', community action can help beat apathy and despair and reduce the reliance on someone else to make a difference.

27

The concept of pre-figuration is not new. Eduard Bernstein said that it is not the far-off goal of socialism that matters, but the movement towards it: 'The movement is everything – and by movement I mean both the general movement of society ie social progress, and the **political and economic agitation and organisation to bring about this progress.'**[27] (emphasis added)

The Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci argued that socialists should engage with the institutions of civil society, for it is here that the battle of ideas is fought out. The prevailing view – the collective 'common sense' – is shaped by these institutions. The dominance of one set of ideas, and thus the hegemony of one dominant group in society, can be challenged and changed. In other words, an alternative view is best expressed through practical action. The best way to change peoples' minds about their lives and environment is to punch holes in their view of reality with real examples of an alternative reality, to 'weld the present to the future' and anticipate future structures and institutions.

Modern communitarian writers such as Amitai Etzioni cite examples of successful community action, often in the face of resistance from official bodies like local government, which improve a locality despite desperate conditions and social breakdown.[28] Charles Leadbeater and Sue Goss and others have conducted similar studies in the UK into initiatives such as the Bromley-by-Bow centre and West Walker primary school.[29]

The incentive for new members to join, and for existing members to become more active, would be huge if they could see a real benefit ensue from the energy they personally expended. Examples of activities for a new community-based party could include:

- A group of local Labour Party members join forces to form a crèche. They take it in turns to provide space in their homes, and club together for a registered child-minder. The local MP helps with all the insurance and registration details. The local Labour Party chair writes to local businesses, and secures partial sponsorship funding from a local burger restaurant. The crèche moves to the spare meeting rooms in the local Labour MP's offices, which are usually only used for evening meetings. New members join and start paying for the child-care. Soon the Labour crèche is paying its way and providing a useful community service.

- A local park is plagued by graffiti and rubbish. The local Labour Party organises a weekend Clean-Up. They leaflet local homes and appeal for help – either by providing bin-bags and lifts to take waste to the tip, or by lending tools, or by turning up on the day and helping for an hour. The local branch of UNISON, with help from the council, provides free helpers and specialist equipment. A local DIY super-store donates enough paint to repaint the park fences and walls. The local schools organise a kids' mural. The local MP launches the event for the local media.

28

- The local Labour Party website is the focal point for all kinds of community information and interaction. It has a virtual bring-and-buy with goods being bought and sold over the net. There's an on-line Problem Page for local people. There's information for new residents. There's also a community notice-board with baby-sitters, bicycle repairers, gardeners, and other useful local services. As the Labour website has more and more local 'visitors', the local estate agents, restaurants and banks start to pay for advertising. Soon the Labour Party website is raising valuable funds for the local party's election coffers.

- The local branch of the high-street bank is due to close. The people living near the bank have no other branch for miles and the bank forms an important anchor in the local business community. Local Labour forms an alliance with tenants groups, the local councillors, the Chamber of Commerce, and other political parties, and lobbies the bank's national headquarters to keep the branch open. The campaign includes letters from the local MP and relevant Ministers, local press stunts including a huge piggy-bank bearing a petition which local people queue up to sign. The bank agrees to stay open for part of the week.[30]

- Local activists come to the local Labour Party for help. One person wants to start a local Credit Union, another wants to start a system of 'Street Leaders' on their estate, and the third wants to start a campaigning group against drug dealers operating near their school. In each case the local Labour Party officers put the individuals in touch with the relevant agencies. Members of the party with experience in the relevant areas provide *pro bono* advice. The party offices provide free telephones for a day. The Labour Party is the platform for new initiatives and open to new ideas.

The Labour Party should be active in creating a present welded to the future, acting as a catalyst for change, drawing together the talents and imagination of a community, nurturing new community leaders, and creating new synergies between groups and individuals. The party must liberate, in the words of John Smith, 'the extraordinary potential of ordinary people'.

With Labour's high water-mark of councillors and Members of Parliament, the task should be easier, with more local resources such as premises and office facilities available to local parties. A Labour MP should not simply be either sucked into Ministerial life and seldom seen in the local high street or supermarket, or making up the numbers week after week in the voting lobbies. They should be a local rallying point for all community activists. The local Labour Party should be the first port-of-call for anyone wanting to change some aspect of their local community.

Putting the 'social' into socialism

A key component of turning the party inside out must be a new emphasis on the social activity of a local party. For many local parties the party 'social' comes once a year – a few peanuts and warm beers in a half-empty hall - providing the excuse to be anti-social the rest of the year. Yet social activity, in all its forms, provides the best glue to hold local parties together, to attract new members, and to raise funds. Local Labour parties have lost their traditional social role. Yet for the first half of the party's history, social activities were the bedrock of local Labour.

Before the Second World War, the Labour Party and other Labour movement groups were the platform for a plethora of activities throughout the country: cycling clubs, rambling clubs, study circles and libraries, music clubs, and children's activities. The London Labour Party provided a platform for a choral union, an amateur dramatic society and even a symphony orchestra. The Clarion movement, as well as cycling clubs had a socialist version of the scouts, as did the Co-operative movement with the Woodcraft Folk.

Philip Snowden in his autobiography recalls the enthusiasm of the Independent Labour Party in Yorkshire in the early twentieth century:

> 'It was politics inspired by idealism and religious fervour. Vocal Unions were formed which accompanied cycling corps into the country at week-ends, and audiences were gathered on village greens by the singing of choirs, then short addresses on socialism were given. On their country jaunts the cyclists distributed leaflets and pasted slips on gates, and some-times on cows, bearing such slogans as "Socialism the Hope of the World".'[31]

The Conservative Party in the 1950s, when its membership was in the millions, was almost exclusively social. Young people went to play ping-pong and meet a future spouse. The Italian Communist Party, especially in the North, ran cultural events and rallies, including concerts, street parties, and picnics. In Sweden, the Social Democrats established 'People's Parks' and 'People's Halls' for working people, with zoos, concert halls and other cultural activities, in-cluding film, theatre and orchestras.

Somehow the British Labour Party has lost this side of its personality, buried under a mountain of committee agendas and consultation documents. Also, the bulk of the party's social activity was organised by women members; post-war patterns of work and the changed role of women within the party have exacerbated the process.

A revived 'social'-ist party would boost membership and levels of activity. Social events should include activities which people already enjoy doing – that's what the Labour choirs, cycling clubs and ramblers were doing in the

1920s and 1930s. Successful examples include those local parties which organise constituency dinners, or take over a local curry house for a Sunday buffet, or enter teams for the local pub quiz. Social activities need not have any political content at all. The oft-cited example of the Labour barb-e-cue aims not to radicalise the workers, but to offer a pleasant afternoon out in a child-friendly environment. Once people have made friends, met 'people like us' and seen local Labour as fun to be part of, they are far more likely to be enticed into canvassing and street stalls.

A party which engages in these kinds of community and social activities will find that its other activities are made easier, and that the patterns of party decline and ossification which were outlined in earlier chapters can be challenged, and that the threat of non-party politics can be met head-on. Bigger, more active local parties can also reverse the trend of declining voter turn-out and the breakdown in trust in politicians by proving that politics can be an activity of 'people like us' and that it can have a positive impact on the locality.

Recruitment is made easier because there are large numbers of people who want to become involved in local activity leading to community change. The Registered Supporters scheme advocated below would also aid membership recruitment. A quarter of the population says it regularly engages in some form of voluntary activity, from the local Roundtable to donating money to the NSPCC. Labour should tap into that reservoir of volunteer-ism. With more members, there are more willing hands to do the work, making activism less all-consuming.

Electioneering is made easier because voters see Labour puts its money where its mouth is and makes a difference in the local area. It is hard for a cynical voter to argue 'we never see you except at election time' or 'what have you ever done for me?' if the local Labour Party has just finished landscaping the local park, or cleaning graffiti off the wall opposite the voter's house, or provided the voter with a local crèche for their children. An active local party helps win support for Labour in national elections.

Such a party – turned outwards into the community, not inwards towards the committee – would truly be able to claim to represent the aspirations and dreams of the majority of the British people, enable Labour Governments to be in tune with the people who elected them, and to be a force for progressive change. Many of the challenges and threats to traditional party structure can be tackled by this new emphasis on local activity.

New networks go beyond geography

Labour's culture and structure is based on geography. The party's units are geographical – branches, covering one or more council wards, parliamentary constituencies, European constituencies, and national parties in Scotland and Wales. The reason is two-fold. First, the Party is geared to fight elections, so its struc-

31

ture matches electoral boundaries; second, the structure was established in an age of poor communications and limited mobility. The first rationale – the need to fight elections – holds true. But the second – poor communications – does not. The age of personal communications means that Labour can become a party not just of geographical communities, but of communities of interest as well.

Electoral geography does not match the geography of communities. Few people identify with the name of the ward they live in. People's postal addresses do not match the names of the Labour Party branches they are asked to join, creating a sense of alienation from the outset. If someone lives in Tooting, why should they feel comfortable joining the 'Bedford branch Labour Party'. The same mismatch between the place people identify with and the place Labour tells them they live occurs throughout the country.

There is no need for the Labour Party to slavishly follow electoral boundaries. Just as in many areas local ward parties have been amalgamated to create a sustainable unit of activity, this precedent should be followed across constituencies. This is particularly true within major cities, where CLPs struggle to keep active within arbitrary constituency boundaries. There are CLPs in London, Manchester, Glasgow, Cardiff, Birmingham and elsewhere which would hugely benefit from being amalgamated for fundraising, policy, and campaigning purposes. Labour has learnt from the success of constituency twinning, and wants to develop 'turn-around teams' to help ailing local parties. Labour, while still needing strong local branches and subsidiarity of decision-making, must no longer be a prisoner of geography.

New networks

New communications and a new mind-set mean that intra-party relations can be horizontal as well as vertical. Members can begin to create communities of interest within the party. There are some communities of interest already – in the form of the affiliated societies such as the Society of Labour Lawyers, the Labour Housing Group, *Poale Zion* and the Socialist Education Association. But these groups tend to be small, with memberships only in the hundreds, and dominated by handfuls of experts.

The capacity to database and store information and create dialogue via the Internet means that the Labour Party nationally and locally has the technological ability to create lateral members' forums around specific interests. These should not be the party pressure groups or special interest groups of old. Instead, special interest groups can be created. They might coalesce around areas like tackling crime, green economics, education, new technology, Labour history or genetic engineering. They might also coalesce around non-political areas such as a shared interest in music, film, theatre, football or travel.

32

This new approach also means that members can reach other members who are school governors, serve on police associations, newly elected councillors, or who are starting up a business. A network of people who like campaigning in by-elections could be created, to form a national pool of willing volunteers for national by-elections. Networks of fundraisers might start to discuss new ideas. Examples of successful local campaigns could be shared throughout the country. The technology is being developed via the *labour.future* initiative. The potential for new creativity and synergy is almost without limit.

Such lateral communication, dialogue and participation creates a new kind of party culture, with greater tangible benefits to members, more active members, and a far healthier internal life. It also makes control by the central party machine impossible, and means that national leaders would have to pay attention to local branches, networks, and individual members.

An individual relationship

Members can enjoy an individual relationship with the Labour Party. On joining the Labour Party, a world of benefits and interesting activities can be opened. Already the party is using the purchasing power of its membership to secure good deals for insurance, holidays and loans. This must be continued and stepped up. New communications means that the party in Government can communicate directly with members. This direct communication is vital to the success of the Labour Government, because the good will and support of members is vital to sustain and build support.

But the structure of hierarchical parties can lead to distortions within the political representative process. The hierarchical model of a political party, with a national leadership at the top, local leaders in the middle, and members at the bottom can lead to a distortion between the views of the three groups. Local leaders, in both parties of the left and right, tend to be more extremist and fundamental in their views than national leaders (who are tempered by practical realities) and members (who tend to be passive and non-ideological). This pattern is explained by John May's *Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity*. It explains why, for example, when the Labour Party balloted on whether to adopt the new Clause IV of the constitution, the national leadership and the party membership are in agreement for the need to change, but the 'local leaders' (in Labour's case the General Committees) opposed change.

When previous Labour Governments failed to communicate with their supporters it was because the tools they had to use failed to do the job. When members' only sources of information about their Government were the distorting prism of the right-wing media, or the biased accounts of *Tribune* or *Militant*, or a three-minute speech to annual conference by a Labour Chancellor, then no wonder Wilson and Callaghan failed to command party support. By contrast, Blair has the ability to talk directly to supporters – via the Internet, and via

targeted communications like *Inside Labour* and direct mail. Members can be up-dated on Government achievements, asked for their views, and be kept in touch with local and regional events.

Registered supporters

New technology means that Labour can reach far beyond its membership, to the millions of people who support the Labour Party in elections or through financial donations. Ninety-seven per cent of the people who vote Labour are not members of the Labour Party. The party's computer systems mean that Labour can draw together those Labour supporters who are still sceptical about joining the party as *registered supporters*. Currently, visitors to the Labour Party website are invited to submit their names and addresses to register as supporters.

These supporters could be offered various opportunities and benefits, such as invitations to hear Government Ministers at local rallies, or invitations to local social events, but not be deluged with internal party material. They would have no voting rights in party elections and ballots, but would be asked for contributions at election time, could be sent details of Government achievements, and be invited to help with local elections and campaigns. The registered supporters' scheme could help bridge the gap between local Labour and the local electorate, and create a deep pool of potential new members.

Abolish General Committees

The abolition of the General Committee (GC) is the single most important reform of the structure of the Labour Party that could ensue from the *Twenty-first Century Party* consultation. It goes well beyond constitutional tinkering or reform for reform's sake. It goes to the heart of the internal culture and ethos of the Labour Party.

GCs should be abolished because:

- they enshrine a two-tier membership structure within the party, where some members are worth more than others;
- they encourage hyper-activism and bureaucracy;
- they fail to efficiently dispatch the work of a local party; and
- they do not represent the views of members, yet claim to speak for them.

GCs are a product of an industrial age, when the local Labour Party in an industrial area would be the crystallisation of organised working-class opinion. The assembled delegates would bring the views of hundreds of other workers from the town. Without transport and communications, the best way to assemble these representative delegations was to meet in a central location once a month and debate resolutions. They are modelled, however loosely, on Soviets.

The official explanation of process is this: 'the constituency party, like the national party, is a federation. Its General Committee which is its governing body, is composed of delegates; these delegates are chosen by local trade union

34

branches, the local Trades Council, the local branches of Socialist and other Societies, the women's sections, and the Ward Committees representing the individual members. The General Committee is the fount of authority.'[32]

Of course today, the class and occupational membership of the party has transformed. Britain has de-industrialised. Trade union membership has plummeted. Some of the biggest unions – most of UNISON and the NUT, for example – are not affiliated to the Labour Party. The delegate-based approach to a local constituency Labour Party fails to work. The T&G delegate, the MSF delegate, the GMB delegate may represent a workplace; but mostly they do not. The ward branch delegates tend to be simply the most active members. Even the affiliated socialist society delegates tend to be merely local activists looking for an easy way onto the GC.

GCs enshrine a two-tier membership because the Labour Party member who is a member of a GC holds greater power and rights than one who does not. A GC member may elect and hold accountable local party officers including the chair, secretary and treasurer; hear monthly reports from the MP and Leader of the Council (if Labour), elect and hold accountable the conference delegate, receive national party documents including consultation documents, and receive and debate correspondence from external organisations. An ordinary member cannot do any of this. A member of a GC can debate and vote for policy which becomes the policy of the entire constituency party, yet the ordinary member is not allowed to speak or vote in such a debate. This is fundamentally elitist.

By receiving and debating resolutions from branches, and reports from other committees, GCs duplicate bureaucracy and cement the internal culture of the party as meetings-based, rather than campaigning based. By being responsible (along with the Executive Committee) for every aspect of party activity, they often fail to adequately perform every function. GCs skew the active membership towards those who enjoy a certain type of activity – meetings and discussion – and away from those who enjoy other forms of activity – socialising, fundraising, recruiting, campaigning, or community work. By abolishing GCs the party would make all forms of activity equal, and encourage existing members to engage in new activities and attract new members.

Task forces

Instead of GCs, there should be task forces of members built around the core activity of the CLP. Groups with an interest in organising political events and policy forums, fundraising, election campaigns, community campaigns, or social events can be formed from willing volunteers not dragooned reluctant helpers.

Members can come together monthly or quarterly to hear about activities in all-party meetings where no one is left out. A big quarterly meeting creating a sense of purpose and a buzz of activity is far more beneficial than a monthly, poorly attended meeting which saps morale.

35

In Enfield Southgate, scene of Stephen Twigg's famous defeat of Michael Portillo, the local party has done away with General Committees. Instead there is a quarterly all-member meeting, and a host of regular discussion groups on different topics. In Durham and Salford, the local parties are currently experimenting with similar structures. Salford has made policy forums the main form of meeting, and works with adjoining constituencies to make the events successful. In Bracknell, the GC has been scrapped, with all-member meetings and an executive to deal with routine bureaucracy instead.

These experiments, sanctioned by the 1997 Labour Party conference, point the way to new ways of working without the old structure of the General Committee which give us a glimpse of the active, mass party which we are capable of becoming.

All power to the members

Like the army, traditional Labour sees its members in terms of units or groups, seldom as individuals. Some even talk of the 'rank-and-file'. The branch is the basic unit, making up a constituency party. Members are part of a larger entity.

This form of organisation is based on a regimented society where workplaces were organised on Fordist lines. People belonged to particular trades and industries. Within the party, limited communications meant that the way to communicate was to get everyone in the same hall at the same time and read out correspondence or invite a guest speaker to deliver a lecture. As such, this form is wholly outmoded for modern needs. People have very different expectations; we expect to be treated as individuals, not as part of an amorphous mass.

The Labour Party is bursting with talent, energy, ideas and ideals. Within its ranks are some of the brightest and best people in Britain. Yet the party fails to realise this potential, with the vast majority of members inert: the Labour Party is a sleeping giant, with only the fingers and toes twitching.

Members are the most important part of the party. Labour Ministers come and go. Labour MPs are ten-a-penny. But members deliver votes, raise funds, and give the party life. So why does the party treat them so poorly? Members are corralled into dreary school halls and community centres on cold dark nights, made to deliver newsletters and run bingo rounds up and down tower blocks. They are confronted by a bewildering array of jargon and acronyms, simmering local feuds, and stultifying bureaucracy. We all know why we went to our first Labour Party meeting – a desire to change the world, defeat Thatcher, or whatever. But why anyone goes to a second one defies rational explanation.

The new Labour Party should view members as a valued, precious commodity, to be treated with respect. Every point of contact between the member and the party should be easy and straightforward, and with membership should come real rights and tangible benefits.

Indeed, all power should be extended to the members. One Member One Vote should become the norm for all party selections and elections, including for party candidates. Positions such as chair, secretary, and treasurer should have six-month terms of office instead of a year, with a one month overlap to help new incumbents learn the ropes. Members should be able to get involved in a variety of ways through the task forces described above, and of course there will always be the need for local branches and local organisation.

The party should also offer first-rate training and support for members, including residential weekend and summer schools. The country is dotted with superb trade union colleges such as the NUT's Stoke Rochford, the MSF's Whitehall College and the AEEU's stately home in Esher. The party should follow the example of the unions, the Fabians and others, and embark on a major programme of member education and training, in everything from political theory and discussion to public speaking, media training and meeting skills.

The role of trade unions

There are some Labour members who want to break the formal link between the Labour Party and the trade union movement.[33] They say the link is an anachronism and has no place in a modern Labour Party. Some trade unionists, such as the General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, Ken Cameron, have argued that it would benefit the unions because they would be able to campaign and lobby a Labour Government freed from the shackles of collective responsibility and the 'elderly relative' relationship.

I believe both approaches are misguided. New Labour proved in 1997 that it can win the support of 'middle England' without jettisoning its roots in the unions. There is no longer any electoral reason for breaking the link. New Labour is a coalition, between different classes, different parts of the country and different political aims and aspirations. The new social democracy for which New Labour stands needs direct links to organised workers and the daily experiences of people in work. One of the reasons for the failure of the SDP was that it cut itself off from the unions, only to discover it had built itself on sand. No party of the left can hope to succeed without a strong relationship, at local and national levels, both with the trade union movement and with individual trade unionists.

Of course the relationship will evolve, as it always has. The founding unions at the Labour Representation Committee conference in 1900 included the Boot and Shoe Operatives, the Cigar Makers' Mutual Association, the London Society of Compositors, the Fancy Leather Workers, the French Polishers' Amalgamated Society, the Matchmakers' Union, the Associated Shipwrights, and the Waiters' Amalgamated Society. In 1903, they were joined by the London Cab Drivers' Association. The trade union movement has changed as rapidly as the economic and social conditions which gave rise to it. Today, unions are focus-

sing on new types of worker, often moving from contract to contract, working from home or in small enterprises, who need tailored services and advice. The days of the mass meeting and the block vote are over. Unions that want to influence the Labour Party will have to recruit their members in the thousands to the Labour Party.

As unions themselves modernise, and recruit new members in the new sectors of the economy, Labour's link to organised Labour will remain important and should not be undermined by modernising Labour's systems of participation and campaigning.

A Members' Charter

New Labour believes in rights being balanced with responsibilities. This approach should be applied to the party itself. Joining the party involves a degree of responsibility. There are rules governing members' behaviour and political activity, including voting, with expulsion as the ultimate sanction against the most recalcitrant offenders.

With that responsibility should come rights. Members should have enshrined rights and guaranteed levels of service and treatment. These rights should extend beyond the right to attend stultifying meetings, the right to deliver leaflets, and the right to be elected a branch officer at your second meeting. Instead members should be treated like the welcome, valuable commodity that they are. The Labour Party should treat its members better than any shop or financial service treats its customers.

Labour's Members' Charter should include:-

- **The right to take part**. Every member of the Labour Party should have the right to take part in the life of the party, and also the right *not* to take part. All barriers to participation should be removed as far as possible. That means the times and venues for meetings and events should be varied month by month so that people with disparate working patterns can join in. There should be disabled access to venues; car lifts should be arranged for those without transport; childcare should be available. It also means that all members should be invited to social events after meetings, such as the traditional trip to the pub. If someone wants to take part, especially in policy discussion and debate, there should be no barrier in their way.

- **The right to interesting events**. Every member of the Labour Party should be given the opportunity to take part in interesting events, not dull business meetings. Each local Labour Party should be compelled to draw up a schedule of different types of events, which appeal to as wide a spectrum as possible. This might include policy forums, meetings with invited speakers, debates, and campaigning planning, but also fundraising dinners, auctions, fetes, and even purely social functions like trips to the theatre or picnics.

The monotonous monthly treadmill of near-identical meetings with an annual 'social' thrown in at Christmas must come to an end.

- **The right to well-run meetings**. The starting and finishing times should be agreed in advance and stuck to. Members should have the right to meetings which start and finish on time, which are professionally chaired, with balanced discussion and debate, and where the same old voices are not allowed to dominate procedings. All Labour Party chairs should be given training and awarded a qualification.

- **The right to information**. Every member of the Labour Party should have the right to information. Information does not mean lengthy minutes posted out every month. There is not a local Labour party in the country which does not have the means to produce a lively monthly newsletter for all members. Increasing numbers of people have email addresses, and these should be used for regular bulletins. Members should have the right to know about all local events and meetings well in advance. Events like policy forums and regional events should be advertised and explained. Consultation exercises such as the electoral reform consultation and the House of Lords Commission should be explained and participation encouraged. No-one in the party should be left out of an activity because they did not know about it.

- **The right to access**. If *Partnership in Power* means real partnership, then Labour Party members should be given access to Government. Ministers, including the most senior, should make themselves available for members' Question and Answer sessions throughout the country. Where Tony Blair has conducted such meetings in recent months, they have been very successful models of open access, non-stage managed events. A commitment from each minister to take part in a couple of meetings per year would cover the whole country. Government Ministers should be accountable to members for more than just their own policy portfolios. Just as spokespeople in an election do, they should be able to explain and listen on the whole range of policy areas.

These rights should be agreed locally, and given in the form of a Charter to every member. Infringements should be appealed against and acted on. There should be a national framework for local Labour to follow and adapt.

New members should be formally 'inducted' into the party, including some explanation of the workings of the party and explaining the Members Charter. In this way, a Members' Charter makes sure the party at a national and local level puts members first.

7. Towards the communitarian party

For the British Labour Party to retain its relevance, and prosper in the post-modern age, it must re-engineer its structures and re-invent its internal ethos and culture. It must become a new model party for other left parties to emulate. The question now is not whether to change, but how. Changes to structure and culture will enable Labour to stem and reverse the threats to parties as discussed earlier.

Labour's proper reaction to its electoral success in 1997 must be to regain its confidence. Labour must be as bold as the men and women who decided to break with the Liberals, to smash the Victorian consensus, and form a new political party.

Success in 1997 was based on a decade-long process of re-positioning and modernisation. Labour sought to define itself against what the party was *not* – not the party of Tony Benn and Michael Foot, not the party of flat caps and miners' galas, not the party of Town Hall militants and extremist policies on race and gender. Neither was it the party of sleaze, of fat cat businessmen buying influence, of unearned wealth and unelected power, as people believed about the Conservatives. But by defining itself against its own past failures or its enemies current ones, Labour did not adequately define what it was *for*.

In the 1997 General Election in key policy areas there were very specific pledges, designed to be delivered in the first term. But now that they have been delivered, what happens next? Labour's appeal must be based on more than simple policy pronouncements which attract majority support. There must be a political project behind the policy pledge cards which can sustain the party beyond the next election. In other words what does New Labour do when it ceases to be 'New' anymore?

The implications of the challenges and opportunities facing political parties and movements world-wide are simple. The rapidly transforming world economy and systems of communications mean that a party such as New Labour, if it is to carry out its political functions and founding purpose, must adapt or die. As has been shown, political parties as a form of organisation have proved resilient to change and because of their fundamental functions in a liberal democracy, they have survived so far. But for parties to survive in the future, they must engage with new forms of governance, democracy and citizens' action.

For Labour, the contemporary choice is not between the existing order and some unappealing leap in the dark. The choice for all those who wish the Labour Party well is between modernisation and ossification. In order to modernise, the party must engage in a process of change that will culminate in a new style of political party. Its characteristics will to some degree be the same as the traditional party: it will consist of active, committed members, it will

seek office and exercise power, it will pursue policy objectives in line with the majority view, and have a healthy internal life. In this, it will draw on many of the 'self-help' traditions of the Labour movement before Labour became a party of government.

But in other ways it will have truly earned the prefix 'new'. It will engage members and supporters in millions, not thousands. Labour will operate on the 'Big Tent' principle – willing to involve people from a range of backgrounds, and welcome those switching from other parties. The Labour Party's historic task has been to become more than a Labour Party – to transcend its class and industrial roots, to reach out to all classes and parts of the country, and to represent the values of the majority of the people.

Instead of squandering the energies and talents of its supporters in useless demoralising activity, it will engage them and release them in pursuit of shared socialist goals. It will value individual members more highly than rich party backers, marketing gurus or foreign Heads of State, and with membership will come rights, education and tangible benefits.

It will be a party which turns outwards – to local campaigns and concerns. Labour members will still be active as councillors, school governors and voluntary workers. But networks of Labour members will also be engaged in social entrepreneurship: running local co-operative businesses, organising crèches and unemployed drop-in centres, rejuvenating tenants' associations, pensioners' forums, and youth clubs, running evening classes and Internet courses, organising volunteers to clean up local parks and police local playgrounds.

Through its campaigning activity in the cities and counties of Britain, Labour members will pre-figure the kind of society they want, prove that citizen action can bring collective improvements, and serve as advocates and ambassadors for the cause they espouse. The local Labour party will serve as social adhesive, holding together the communities fractured by the centrifugal pull of globalisation.

The Labour Party will become a new kind of party – a Communitarian Party – working not merely as a vote-gathering machine or a rent-a-audience to provide a backdrop for television coverage of its leaders, but as an agent of change working in league with the party in local, national, and supra-national government. By unleashing the power of new technology, new supporters and donors can be reached, and more people can be engaged in politics. For example, in March 2000 the Arizona Democrats held their presidential Primary using the Internet – the first time a legally binding election was held on the web. Other states – Florida, Iowa, Washington and California – are considering uses teledemocracy to conduct elections. The new technology can reach new voters and revive flagging democratic systems. In structure and culture, and in its forms of activity, the new Labour Party will be different from the old (see Figure 4).

41

Figure 4: Differences between Traditional and a new Communitarian Labour Party

Old Labour Party 2000	New Labour Party 2020
Membership under half a million	Members and registered supporters in the millions
Based on committees and branches	Based on individuals and networks
Nineteenth century communications (meetings, 'snail mail', newsletters)	Twenty-first century communications (on-line discussions, web-based communications)
Squanders members' talent and energy	Realises supporters' talent, creates synergy
Discourages activity	Rewards activity
Turns inwards	Turns outwards to community
Mostly public sector workers	Reflects workers in all sectors
'Natural home' for trade unionists	'Natural home' for social entrepreneurs
Debates policy	Makes policy a reality through action
Looks forward to social change	Creates social change now

We see glimpses of this Communitarian Party in the most advanced and active existing Labour Parties. In Sedgefield, County Durham for example, the local party has over two thousand members, and owns and runs an active community centre in Trimden village. The local officers concentrate on membership recruitment and retention through lively campaigns and social events. The Labour Party is active in all areas of the community. It is worth noting that this approach was adopted and was successful well before the local MP had joined the Shadow Cabinet.

By becoming a Communitarian Party, by instigating and moulding social change instead of passing resolutions about it, the Labour Party will prove that Marx was right, in this at least, that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it. If Labour has the courage to change, to release its latent talents, to empower its existing members and reach millions more, to act as an engine for social change and to get its hands dirty in doing the job, then Labour can prove that political parties have a role in an anti-political age. If we achieve that, then the future lies not in scepticism and self-interest, but with the values of mutual interdependence and belief in community.

8. Conclusion – parties in the future

The Death of Political Parties, like that of Mark Twain, is exaggerated. It may serve the theses of the apocalyptic future-shockers to claim that parties around the world are playing out their final scenes. However, liberal democracy is a durable political system and, as we have seen, with it comes the need to organise opinion.

The lesson of the twentieth century was not that democratic party politics was finished, but that it triumphed over dictatorship. During the closing stages of the last century, in the Soviet Union, across the Eastern Bloc, in South Africa, and elsewhere, political parties were born, grew and won power. In the early years of this century, China and perhaps even the dictatorships of the Middle East, must surely follow the same road. So long as there are forms of representative governance, there will be political parties.

We cannot ignore the rise of protest groups and citizens' action – and successful parties will learn how to listen and learn from them, just as parties rose to the challenge of the women's and environmental movements thirty years ago.

Of course, political parties will evolve and transmute, more rapidly than ever before. The new technology allows a myriad of new ways to function, to serve and involve members and to communicate with voters. The way they organise will be challenged by societal change. As politics becomes less centred on the nation-state, so parties will organise across boundaries. Their internal cultures and lives will reflect changing aspirations and expectations.

This pamphlet has sought to evaluate these trends and suggest ways the Labour Party and other socialist parties should develop and change to survive these challenges and threats. The communitarian model is one which could be adopted as pilot schemes, and perhaps Labour's leadership should allow a number of local Labour parties the resources and freedom to experiment with radical new ways of organising local activity.

The functions of parties in a parliamentary democracy determine to a large degree their activity, but within the need to aggregate opinion, link citizen and state, contest elections and exercise power, lies a range of possibilities for new ways of working. As long as men and women desire social change, and are willing to band together in political activity based on their shared values, the party is far from over.

43

Notes

[1] See for example S Bartolini in *Western European Party Systems,* H. Daalder and P. Mair, Sage, 1983.

[2] *Living on Thin Air,* C. Leadbeater, Viking, 1999.

[3] The Henley Centre, *Planning for Social Change 1996-97*.

[4] *The Other Invisible Hand*, G. Mulgan and C Landry, Demos, 1995.

[5] *Post Capitalist Society*, P. Druker, Butterworth Heinemann, 1993.

[6] *When Parties Fail*, K. Lawson and P. Merkl, Princetown University Press, 1988.

[7] *Political Parties*, M. Duverger, Methuen, 1954.

[8] Op. Cit.

[9] This model overlooks the fact, obvious to anyone actively engaged in politics, that all parties seek to maximise their vote in elections and reach as many voters as possible. In Italy, Togliatti reached into all classes, the Tories were in Government in the 1930s thanks to the votes of working class electors, and the Labour Government of Clement Attlee reached deep into the shires of England, a feat bettered by Tony Blair in 1997.

[10] "Maybe this time: the emergence of the pragmatic left in Italy", J. Watson in *Renewal,* 1995.

[11] *Politics without Frontiers*, M. Leonard, Demos, 1997.

[12] See, for example, *Politics in an Anti-political Age*, G. Mulgan, Polity Press, 1994.

[13] *The Third Way*, A. Giddens, Polity Press, 1998.

[14] *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, E. Hobsbawm, Verso, 1981.

[15] *True Blues*, Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, OUP, 1994.

[16] *New Labour – New Grassroots Party?*, Seyd and Whiteley, paper presented to the PSA, 1998.

[17] *A Twenty-first Century Party*, Labour Party, 1999.

[18] Hence the story of the delegate at the compositing meeting on his knees trying to save 'The National Health Service.' Not the actual NHS – but the words, which had fallen behind a radiator!

[19] *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1993*, ed. Denver et al, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

[20] *Labour's Grassroots*, P. Seyd and P. Whiteley, OUP, 1992.

[21] *The Mechanics of Victory*, Young Fabian Pamphlet 3, 1962.

[22] *The Labour Party – an organisational study*, ed. Inigo Bing, Fabian Tract 407, 1971.

[23] *The Labour Party: crisis and prospects*, D. Hayter, Fabian Tract 451, 1977.

[24] *New Labour: a stakeholders party*, Labour Co-ordinating Committee. 1995.

[25] See, for example, Sidney Webb's comment that local Labour Parties 'were frequently unrepresentative groups of nonentities dominated by fanatics and cranks and extremists' quoted in *The Labour Party and the Working Class*, T. Forrester, Heinemann, 1976, or George Orwell's view that socialism attracted 'every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'nature cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England...the worst advertisement for socialism is its adherents', *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin, 1937.

[26] *The Left*, ed. G. Kaufman, Blond, 1966.

[27] Cited in *Marxism and Social Democracy: the revisionist debate, 1896-1898*, ed. H. Tudor and J. M. Tudor, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[28] For an example, see the case of Carlos Padilla in the South Bronx, USA who organised the clear-up of a waste tip next to a local school, only to be arrested by the New York city police, in *The Spirit of Community*, A. Etzioni, Fontana, 1995.

[29] *Civic Entrepreneurship*, C. Leadbeater and Sue Goss, Demos, 1998.

[30] In the late 1980s Labour members in the Bloomsbury area of London campaigned successfully to persuade Tesco to keep its local branch open, and led the company to reassess its policy leading to the urban 'Metro' Tesco stores.

[31] Quoted in the *Rise of the Labour Party*, P. Adelman, Longman, 1985.

[32] *The Labour Party Today: what it is and how it works*, M. A. Hamilton, 1939.

[33] See for example *The Union Link: the Case for Friendly Divorce*, D. Sassoon in *Renewal*, January 1993.

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46

FABIAN
S O C I E T Y

Is the Party Over?

The future does not look bright for the political party. In most of the established liberal democracies, membership levels are falling. Rapid social and technological change has undermined the relevance of traditional parties, both to politics and to people. The rise of pressure groups and consumer action challenges the legitimacy of party politics itself. Some have interpreted this as evidence that the party may soon be over.

This pamphlet sets out an alternative vision. It argues that the mass political party – and the Labour Party specifically – can become a vibrant and viable part of civil society in the 21st century. By turning outwards towards the local community, and engaging directly with its concerns, the Party can build a base of support which is counted in millions and which includes all parts of the community. This will require structural and cultural changes: breaking down the bureaucracy and rigid geography of the organisation; exploiting the new technologies to communicate more effectively; and beginning to see all members – whatever their contribution – as central to the Labour's success.

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