

Towards a More Responsible Two Party System

The British Party System Reconsidered

By

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Abstract

Fifty years ago a distinguished group of American political scientists suggested that their government would be improved if US parties adopted the responsible party model. They used Britain as a model for this, characterising the British system as having national party programs, regular policy-making conventions, strong and active local branches, permanent professional staff and program-conscious party members. The aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which the contemporary British party system fits this model in relation to the role of party members. It examines the importance of party programs in recruiting and sustaining party members in the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. It looks at the extent to which there are underlying values and beliefs in the attitudes of party members, and explores their own conception of their role in developing policies and programmes. The paper concludes by examining some of the dilemmas for party management created by these attitudes among grassroots party members.

Introduction

Fifty years ago a distinguished group of American political scientists recommended that their government would be improved if parties became more responsible. By responsible the political scientists meant principled and accountable. Their view was that US parties should have national programmes, regular policy-making conventions, strong and active local branches, permanent professional staff, and programme-conscious party members. These new responsible parties would replace the existing 'loose confederations of state and local machines'(APSA, 1950: 25), and they would no longer act 'as mere brokers between different groups and interests, but as agencies of the electorate' (APSA, 1950:16). Such responsible parties would provide 'an alternative to government by pressure group' (APSA, 1950:85).

Assuming that fifty years later another group of distinguished American political scientists decided that the responsible party was worth recommending would they still look to Great Britain as the model? What has happened to British parties since 1950? Are they programmatic, do they recruit programme-conscious members who participate in the formulation of the party programmes, do they have strong and active constituency organisations and do they maintain professional bureaucracies?

The answers to these questions require more space than is available in this paper so here we propose to concentrate upon an underlying feature of the entire original APSA report, namely the need for responsible parties to have active members. Three of the five features of the responsible party model highlighted in the report require parties to have an active grassroots membership; these are regular policy-making conventions, strong and active local branches, and a programme-

conscious membership. A fourth - a national programme - would involve participation and deliberation by party members. Arguably, understanding the role and activities of party members is the key to understanding the responsible party model.

On the basis of our studies of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members over the past ten years,¹ we report on the state of British parties at the grassroots in this paper. We propose, first, to examine the trends in party membership over time to see how their overall numbers have changed; secondly, we will consider whether the individuals who join British parties are programme-conscious and if such programmes help to recruit and motivate them once they have joined; and, third, to probe the extent to which members expect to participate in policy-making and programme building. We conclude by considering some of the dilemmas involved in managing parties which in Britain at least remain responsible in terms of the APSA committee's underlying assumptions.

Party Membership

It might be thought that the APSA committee's attachment to the importance of party membership is outdated. Certainly there are numerous academics and contemporary political commentators who take this view. For example, Mair has suggested that 'the party on the ground ... is becoming less important or ... is in decline' (1997: 24). Richardson has argued that 'citizens now have an active market-place for participation in which to shop' (1994: 17). As a consequence he believes that individuals today are more likely to join pressure groups than political parties. The *Guardian's* political editor writes that 'decline [of members] is inevitable' (June 23, 1998). To some extent the parties themselves have helped to confirm such opinions. Individual membership of both Conservative and Labour parties started to decline soon after the APSA committee reported

and, as can be seen in Table 1, that trend has continued almost unabated.²

- Table 1 about here -

The fact that between 1994 and 1997 the Labour party reversed the trend decline suggests that it is not some inevitable feature of modern society and politics but can be influenced by a party's own recruitment strategies. For much of the post-war period both the Labour and Conservative leaderships displayed only limited interest in their membership. Periodic recruitment campaigns initiated from the 1960s onwards were more symbolic than real, essentially because both leaderships were not convinced of the importance of members. The development of a new communications technology, television and advertising in particular, meant that so long as parties could obtain the money for election campaigning, they did not feel the need for human resources. Members were regarded as less efficient a means of communicating with voters than the TV "fireside chat" or the mass advertising campaign. This attitude was strongly influenced by an academic consensus that members were not important in influencing electoral outcomes (Butler and King, 1966; Epstein, 1967; Butler and Kavanagh, 1988).

However, after almost forty years of relative indifference to members, a transformation in attitude has occurred in which both the Labour and Conservative party leaderships have openly and publicly committed themselves to the expansion of membership as an important feature of their political strategies. Labour's declared target is half a million members by 2001 (Labour Party, 1998) and, similarly, the Conservative's is 1 million by 'the Millennium' (Conservative Party, 1997: 26). After expanding membership from 305,000 in 1994 to 405,000 in 1997, Labour has not settled back in government and relaxed its recruitment campaign, although recruitment has stalled since the election. It is noticeable the extent to which Prime Minister Blair constantly emphasises

the importance of members as part of his long-term governing project (see, for example, *Guardian*, May 1, 1998; *Tribune*, February 25, 2000). Similarly, the Conservative party, after a disastrous haemorrhaging of its membership during the 1990s, is now intent on reproducing Labour's recruitment successes.

The reasons for this switch to a determined membership-recruitment strategy are fourfold. First, the electoral benefits of an active membership became more apparent in the 1990s. Research has revealed that locally-active members who engaged in contacting voters through delivering leaflets and canvassing and in mounting election-day organization to ensure voter turn out, produce highly significant effects on constituency outcomes in general elections (Denver and Hands, 1997; Johnston and Pattie, 1995; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994). By 1992 the Labour party had taken note of the claims that an active membership brought beneficial electoral consequences.³

The best example of the electoral benefits of an active membership occurred in the 1997 general election when the Liberal Democrats more than doubled their number of MPs in the House of Commons at the same time as their share of the national vote declined. This was largely due to targeted, local campaigns in which its local activists played a significant role (Whiteley and Seyd, 1999).

Second, members enhance a party's political legitimacy. A large and increasing membership suggests popular support. Recruitment of new members became a major feature of Blair's leadership enabling him to claim that Labour spoke for a broad community of people, in contrast to the Conservative's diminishing and narrow constituency. One of the reasons for the Conservative leader, William Hague, wanting to recruit new Conservative members has been to

provide him and his party with a source of political legitimacy. It is a means by which he can demonstrate that his personal qualities of leadership are attractive and it enables him to claim that the Conservative party is attracting a broader and more representative level of support. Similarly, the re-emergence of the Liberal Democrats as a significant force in British politics has been closely identified with its claim to have strong links in local communities.

Third, all parties are now keen to demonstrate their democratic credentials by extending membership participation in party decision-making. New structures and procedures have been created to enable members to play a significant role in intra-party affairs. In such circumstances new members are an added attraction if they are more inclined to support the leadership than existing members and activists. Labour's experience between 1979 and 1983, when the party had come under the powerful influence of left activists, and subsequently came very close to electoral collapse, played an important part in Neil Kinnock's, and then John Smith's, commitment to membership recruitment. Their introduction, and subsequent development, of one-member, one-vote procedures, emphasised the important role of individual members in reducing the collective role of the trade unions and also in weakening activists' powers. Blair's use of ballots of all individual members on some policy issues has been based upon his belief that the inactive members are more likely to support his objectives.

Finally, members are an important source of party funding. An essential feature of the British party system has been its voluntaristic nature, one consequence of which has been that parties have received only limited state aid and have been reliant for the bulk of their income upon donations from corporate bodies, such as companies and trade unions, as well as individuals. The corporate sector has provided the overwhelming proportion of Conservative and Labour party

income. However, recent controversies regarding the funding of both parties, and possible corrupt practices, raised some public concern and, in response to this, a greater degree of transparency in party finances is emerging (see *Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life*, TSO, 1998).

Both Conservative and Labour parties now place a greater emphasis upon the role of their members as subscribers and fund-raisers as the Liberal Democrats have been forced to do out of necessity. The ever-rising expense of maintaining the day-to-day activities of a party, and the need to mount sophisticated and costly election campaigns, requires large sums of money and members as either donors or fund-raisers have assumed a greater significance.

So far we have demonstrated the importance that party leadership attach to members. In that sense these parties continue to fulfil one of the essential requirements of the responsible party model. But the APSA committee went further by stressing the importance of ‘a program-conscious party membership’ to ensure that the influence of personality, patronage and locality was reduced. But how programme conscious are the members? This has three dimensions; firstly, how important are principles and programmes for recruiting individuals into the party? Secondly, to what extent do members retain a stable set of principles which can underpin a party programme and guide policies? Thirdly, to what extent do members believe that they should play a significant part in a party’s policy-making processes?

Party Members, Programmes and Principles

To examine the first of our concerns, the relationship between recruitment and party principles, some insight into this is provided by evidence from our surveys of Labour (1997, 1999), Conservative (1992) and Liberal Democrat (1999) members (Seyd and Whiteley, 1999; Whiteley,

Seyd and Richardson, 1994; Whiteley and Seyd, 1998). Members were asked their reasons for joining their respective parties, and although responses were varied it is possible to get an idea of the importance of principles in influencing members' decisions to join the party in the first place.

– Table 2 --

It can be seen in Table 2 that for both Labour and Liberal Democrat parties more than one third, and for the Conservative party more than one fifth, of members cited principles as the main reason for joining the party. Moreover, if the category 'party policies' are added to this on the grounds that policies reflect principles, then about 40 percent of Labour party members, 34 percent of Conservative party members, and 52 percent of Liberal Democrats joined for these reasons. Clearly, party principles and the policies which they generate play a very important role in explaining recruitment to the parties.

However, before strong conclusions can be reached about the role of principles in the minds of party members, it is important to give substance to this idea of party principles. If there is little evidence for the proposition that party members actually possess a set of coherent principles, then the term is largely empty of meaning. On the other hand if a basic set of principles underpin the attitudes of members to the major issues of British politics then party principles are likely to have important effects on motivating them politically.

Our research reveals that Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat members hold distinct opinions and that underlying these are distinctive ideological principles. In 1992 we wrote that Labour members 'are critical of the market economy, and prefer more public intervention and the public provision of services; they believe that the bargaining rights of trade unions should be maintained; and, finally, they dislike Britain's possession of nuclear weapons, and want to cut

overall spending on defence' (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992: 118). Furthermore, we concluded that Labour members' attitudes are significantly structured around four underlying dimensions - a general left/right dimension, a redistribution dimension, a dimension concerned with political principles and, finally, one concerned with internal and external democratic reforms (1992:120-4).

– Table 3 about here –

Table 3 is a factor analysis of the attitudes of Labour party members in our 1997 survey designed to examine the extent to which the broad principles underlying their attitudes still exist⁴. These results are not directly comparable to the earlier analysis, since a number of the issue-indicators examined in our 1990 survey are no longer salient in British politics⁵, and in addition we have included new attitude indicators in the survey. Notwithstanding this point there is a clear structure of attitudes which can be identified among Labour party members. Attitudes are structured around issues of the trade unions and economic policies, the role of the party leadership, internationalism and ideas of collectivism and class. For example in relation to the first factor it is evident that attitudes to the role of the market and to the role of trade unions in the economy are directly linked to the left-right scale. Overall the structure of attitudes is similar to what it was in 1990, and it is clear that there are important links between different policy issues in the minds of party members.

– Table 4 about here --

Table 4 conducts a similar exercise in examining the structuring of beliefs for Conservative members, using data from our 1992 survey. Conservatives hold a variety of opinions which do not divide precisely into neatly-defined categories but there are three underlying dimensions to their attitudes. First, there is a traditionalism dimension, which is wary of social and political change;

second, an individualistic dimension, characterized by a preference for the market provision of collective goods; and, third, progressivism, in which government accepts responsibility for managing the economy and alleviating poverty (Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994: 132-142). Again, this can be illustrated by examining the loadings of attitudes on factor one, which shows that attitudes to government spending, redistribution and the regulation of industry are all linked together in the minds of grassroots Conservatives.

– Table 5 about here --

Table 5 repeats the exercise for Liberal Democrats, using data from our 1999 survey. Among Liberal Democrat members there is a modest amount of attitude structuring around four underlying, ideological indicators (Seyd and Whiteley, 1999). Lifestyle and economic libertarianism are two such factors; the first links attitudes on a wide range of personal issues, such as sexuality, abortion, drugs and censorship, and the second revolves around limited state intervention in economic and social affairs. Interestingly the two are not closely correlated, so that support for freedom of the individual on lifestyle issues does not imply support for free-market solutions to economic and social problems. The third element, in contrast to the second, reflects a social democratic commitment to redistribution, expressed in terms of governments raising the level of taxes and spending more money on such public services as health and education. Finally, there is a distinct European element to Liberal Democrats' opinions, articulated in support of various aspects of further EU integration.

Overall, we can see that general principles underpin specific attitudes for the members of all three parties and there is some similarity between them, although there are important differences as well. A necessary condition for party members to get involved in developing party programmes is

that they have coherent attitudes to contemporary issues and that their beliefs are structured to some extent. The evidence suggests that this is the case.

A third feature of the APSA report was the committee's commitment to internal party democracy. It recommended that the party program 'be drafted at frequent intervals by a broadly representative convention...' (APSA, 1950: 10), that local party groups should 'meet frequently to discuss and initiate policy' (APSA, 1950: 67) and that leaders should maintain contacts with their members. To what extent does this prevail? We consider this next.

Internal Party Democracy

Five years after the publication of the APSA report McKenzie (1955) concluded his comprehensive study of power within the Conservative and Labour parties with the argument that 'the distribution of power within the two parties is overwhelmingly similar' (1955:582) and that although neither leaderships could afford to ignore their members both were primarily 'the servants of their respective parliamentary parties' (1955: 590). In his view the claims by both parties that internal party democracy prevailed were much exaggerated. The APSA committee's idea, therefore, of members initiating or drafting policies was one which McKenzie suggested neither occurred in practice nor normatively should occur.

McKenzie's conclusions have since been challenged by Minkin (1978) and Kelly (1989) who both argue that he underestimated the role of members as policy makers within the Labour and Conservative parties respectively. Nevertheless, the powerful oligarchical tendencies to which Robert Michels (1902) first drew attention have been reinforced over recent decades both by modern campaigning technologies and by the requirements of policy-making. Both time and specialism are resources at a premium, and both can result in the strengthening of the powers of

party leadership.

The proliferation of news outlets, the arrival of 24 hour news stations, and the revolution in news-gathering techniques, require immediate political responses that inevitably centralize party decision-making and allow for only limited consultation. Flexible and speedy responses are required by party spokespersons and the time for widespread consultations on anything but the most general aspects of policy is almost impossible. There is also an increased premium on specialist knowledge necessary to deal with policy matters. The complexity of policy means a greater reliance upon professionals whether from the civil service or the “think-tanks” rather than from “amateur” members (Denham, 1996; Kandiah and Seldon, 1996).

Both Labour and Conservative parties have introduced specific party reforms some of which may strengthen and others weaken the powers of their leaders. Perhaps the most significant of these reforms has been the introduction of membership ballots to elect the leaders, a procedure which the Liberal Democrats adopted in 1988. Labour and the Conservative have subsequently followed suit.

Both the Labour and Conservative parties have also introduced leadership-initiated plebiscites on policy proposals and constitutional reforms. For the Labour party this has meant the abandonment of its century-long attachment to delegatory democracy, and for the Conservative party an explicit and formal recognition of the role of members within the party. However, critics of both the Blair and Hague leaderships argue that these ballots, by empowering all members rather than just activists, strengthen the power of the leaders. It is argued that a system of plebiscitary democracy is developing rather than a genuine system of grassroots participation.

Mair supports these critics and claims that the empowerment of individual members

bypasses the knowledgeable activists, and enfranchises those who 'are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership' (1997:149). He suggests that 'democratization on paper may ... actually coexist with powerful elite influence in practice' (1997: 150).

The evidence, however, of the impact of this direct democracy on the distribution of power within the parties is rather mixed. As the leadership desired, membership ballots in the Labour party overwhelmingly approved the reform of Clause 4 of the party constitution in 1994, the clause which dealt with the public ownership of industry, and agreed with the proposed general election manifesto in 1996. But on the other hand, notwithstanding the leadership's powerful campaign against Ken Livingstone, members in London voted overwhelmingly for him to be the party's candidate for mayor of London. They have also endorsed other leadership critics by voting for them in the elections for the National Executive Committee of the party. Furthermore, our survey evidence reveals that inactive Labour members have opinions which are not that different from the active members and therefore they may not be automatically more supportive of the leadership as Mair claims (see Seyd and Whiteley, 1992).

In addition to the introduction of membership ballots, both Labour and Conservative parties have modified their internal procedures and practices in such a way as to affect the balance of power within their respective organisations. For Labour, the formal role of the annual conference in policy making has been downgraded, although it retains ultimate sovereign authority. A new structural framework has been established, with a joint policy committee⁶, charged with the 'strategic oversight of policy development' (Labour Party, 1997: 8), a national policy forum⁷, charged 'with overseeing the development of a comprehensive policy programme from which will

be drawn the manifesto for the next election' (Labour Party, 1997: 14), and eight commissions⁸ to develop specific areas of policy.

There are features of Labour's new policy-making structures which tilt the balance of power away from the individual member; for example, the leadership's greater control of the proceedings at the annual conference. On the other hand, there is also potential for member involvement and influence in the network of local and national policy forums.

Less than a year after the Conservatives comprehensive election defeat in 1997, and the subsequent election of Hague as leader, the party's Central Council approved the most far-reaching reforms of the twentieth century. For the first time in its history the Conservative party now exists in a constitutionally-defined manner. The three previously distinct elements of the party - parliamentary, national union and central office - have now been merged. The National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations has been abolished. For over one hundred years the party's principle organizational feature had been to allow members to select parliamentary candidates but then to isolate the parliamentary party and the party leadership from their pressures. Now, however, the new constitution specifically states that 'the Party shall consist of its members' (Conservative Party, 1998: 4) and these members have been given the right to elect their party leader if and when s/he resigns, or if 15 percent of the parliamentary party succeed in a "no confidence" motion.

What then is the role of party members in developing the party programme, and in particular how do the members see their role? We turn to this issue next.

Party Members and Programmatic Goals

Since 1950 manifestos have grown both in their length and the number of specific

commitments (Topf, 1994). There are those, however, who claim that manifestos have increasingly become nothing more than public relations exercises. For example, Weir and Beetham (1999: 100-110) argue that they are full of bland promises, their wording is intentionally ambiguous so as not to alienate any potential supporter and not to create future hostages to fortune, and they fudge issues. Furthermore, Weir and Beetham claim that a manifesto is only one feature of an election campaign: press conferences, leaders' speeches and interviews, and party election broadcasts are all part of the campaign and are just as likely to produce policy commitments. Both points have some validity. In line with the general developments in public relations and advertising, the party manifestos have become glossier and include more voter-friendly photographs.

Parties clearly avoid taking too precise a position in their manifestos on issues. Inevitably during the short, intensive election campaign other policy commitments are likely to emerge. Nevertheless, the emphasis parties place in their manifestos upon different issues varies and this is an indicator of relative priorities. In British politics the party manifesto is the most visible representation of party programmes. In Ian Budge's words:

'Manifestos are not widely read by the British public. Their importance is that they are read by the political and media elite and reported intensively in newspapers, TV and radio. Thus their textual emphases set the tone and themes of campaign discussion. The document does, therefore, represent the way party leaders, after lengthy consideration, want to present themselves to the public' (Budge, 1999: 2).

As a consequence, manifestos retain their importance.

Recent research on party programmes has focused primarily on the question of their relevance for governance and electoral behaviour (Rose, 1984; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge

1994; Royed, 1996). Our concern is narrower than this and focuses on the role of party members in constructing and also in enforcing these programmes, both of which are currently highly contested issues within the parties. Party members' first role is in helping to define the contents of the manifesto. In this respect Labour has pioneered new organisational forms for involving members in this process. Since 1997 discussions on the party's forthcoming election manifesto have been centered on the national policy forum, with its regional and local counterparts. Our survey evidence from 1999 suggests that 11 percent of the membership, or just over 40,000 individuals had attended a policy forum in the previous year. Significant majorities of these members found these policy forum meetings to be interesting, friendly, efficiently run and easy to understand. However, only about a third of these members believed them to be influential, with more than a third believing them not to be influential.

This evidence highlights the central dilemma of grassroots participation for party leadership in general. On the one hand leaders would like to tightly control the contents of the manifesto, to ensure that it reflects their own priorities and those of their target voters. On the other hand if party members feel no ownership of this document or are hostile to it, because they have been excluded from influencing its contents, then they are unlikely either to campaign for it or to help the leadership enforce it within the Parliamentary party. Moreover, a demotivated membership has malign consequences for party fund-raising and political communications as well as for campaigning.

-- Table 6 --

We can probe the attitudes of Labour party members to their role in creating the party programme and policies. In our surveys members were asked to express a preference for three different models of policy-making, which can be described as plebiscitary, mandatory and

deliberative respectively. It can be seen that in 1997, following the electoral triumph, members were willing to accept the plebiscitary model in which the party leadership decides policy initiatives and then asks members to endorse them. The second most popular option was the deliberative model in which policy initiatives emerge from the deliberative processes which go on in the policy forums. The least popular was the traditional mandate model, in which policies are decided at annual conference on the basis of cursory debates of over-complex, even contradictory resolutions which have been sent in from local party branches.

Interestingly enough by 1999 after two years of a Labour government, opinions had clearly shifted away from the plebiscitary model towards the more member-centred deliberative and mandate models of decision-making. Policy forums were preferred by a plurality in the later survey, and the plebiscitary model lost considerable ground compared with 1997.

In their reorganisation of the party structure which took place immediately following the 1997 general election, the Conservatives introduced regional and national policy forums with the task of being 'responsible for ensuring that party members have adequate opportunity to discuss and debate policy' (Fresh Future, 1998: 30). Even though this innovation is less formalised than Labour's, the idea of policy forums is similar. The fact that they have been introduced demonstrates the importance attached by the leadership to promoting an active grassroots party.

In the case of the Liberal Democrats there has always been a strong tradition of member participation within the party organisation, inherited from the old Liberal party. As Ingle writes:

'The Liberal Democrats have built a party which encourages popular participation and makes such participation feasible' (1996: 130).

Perhaps because of this the Liberal Democrats have not embarked on a major

reorganisation of the party structure of the type adopted by Labour and subsequently the Conservatives in recent years.

Our surveys of members of all three parties make it possible to evaluate the attitudes of party members to their role in decision-making in their respective parties during the 1990s. The evidence in Table 7 derives from our 1999 surveys of Labour and the Liberal Democrats and our 1994 survey of the Conservatives.

– Table 7 about here–

It can be seen in Table 7 that a majority of both Liberal Democrat and Labour members believe that they have the necessary knowledge to make policy and are unlikely to be impressed by the idea that policy-making is something only for experts. Furthermore members in neither party believe that their role is merely to support decisions made by their leadership. Perhaps most interesting of all is that a plurality of Labour and Liberal Democrats believe that their party conference should be the ultimate source of authority. This of course has been the formal constitutional position in the Labour party since it was founded, although this has never been true for the Liberal Democrats. Notwithstanding this point 43 percent of Liberal Democrats agree or strongly agree with this idea.

Turning to the Conservatives in Table 7, it is striking that over two-thirds of them believed that party policies should be determined by the members at the time of our 1994 survey. However, they also believed that the leadership did not pay much attention to their views. It will be interesting to see in the future if the changes in the party structure which have occurred since 1997 have changed these views.

Turning next to the role of members as enforcers of parliamentary discipline, a

consequence of the programmatic nature of British parties, and the fusion of executive and legislative powers, has been the disciplined voting behaviour of MPs. Their election to the House of Commons as party representatives, and thus as standard bearers for a party programme, has obliged them to sustain or oppose the executive's actions according to whether they are on the government or opposition back benches. Cohesive voting behaviour of MPs along party lines has been a prominent feature of the twentieth century legislature (Norton, 1975, 1980). However, disciplined voting has been declining as a consequence of various factors including the styles and capabilities of party leadership, the impact of the issue of British membership of the European Union, and the social and cultural changes occurring among parliamentarians and party activists (Norton, 1980). Party discipline in the House of Commons is maintained by a variety of rules and procedures and the leadership have a range of powers to help enforce loyalty. But local party members with their rights to select and to de-select parliamentary candidates are the ultimate enforcers of this discipline. Party leadership have not attempted to take away this right as yet, feeling that this would seriously damage the incentives of local members to be active.

If local party members support rebellious behaviour on behalf of their local MPs, then the leadership has limited ability to impose new candidates on those parties. Examples of this include the rebellion by Eurosceptic backbench Conservatives in 1995 (Whiteley and Seyd, 1999a). This issue led to eight backbenchers losing the whip and a further one resigning the whip in 1995. The local Conservative associations supported their MPs in these cases and so the party leadership could not enforce the ultimate sanction of replacing them by different candidates.

More recently the Labour government has faced large backbench revolts over its proposals to reform welfare benefits. However, on such an issue the party leadership could not enforce the

threat of reselection, because of the support of party members for welfare expenditure.

Consequently no such threats have been issued.

Conclusions

The recent experience of both Labour and the Conservatives in general elections highlights the dilemma which leaders face in party management. On the one hand if members are given free-reign to write the party programme the risk is that the result will be like the 1983 Labour party manifesto described as the 'longest suicide note in history'. It is widely thought that the manifesto contributed to Labour's massive electoral defeat in the general election of that year.

On the other hand the Conservative's experience in 1997 illustrates the alternative dilemma, in which party members are almost completely marginalised in policy-making and in developing the manifesto. In the Conservatives *Blueprint for Change* (1997), the leadership explained that structural reforms were needed because:

'We have failed to involve sufficiently those members we have recruited, to provide attractive new avenues for participation and as a result there has been a continuation of the decline in membership' (1997: 2).

This weakness in the grassroots party significantly contributed to the electoral defeat of 1997 (Whiteley and Seyd, 1999b).

This dilemma was neglected in the original APSA report, which very much reflected a 'top-down' perspective of party organisation. The report recognized the importance of party members for sustaining parties and thus cohesive government, but paid little or no attention to the incentives of party members to participate in this process. While recognizing the importance of members for leaders, it failed to recognize the importance of members in their own right. In this respect the

APSA report reflected the perspectives of party theorists like McKenzie (1955), who regarded party members as a stage army of willing volunteers whose sole purpose was to support the leadership.

Much contemporary theorizing about parties, whether in relation to the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995), or the electoral-professional party (Panebianco, 1988) continues this top-down perspective, losing sight of the fact that ultimately parties are voluntary organisations run by individuals who have to be motivated to participate in political action. However, a number of contemporary theorists are aware of this dilemma and it has been discussed fully in relation to German and British parties (Scarrow, 1996; Maor, 1997) This is the key contested issue within British parties at the present time and it has implications for the relevance of the responsible party model in the United States both in 1950 and today. American dilemmas are different, centering on issues of campaign finance to a much greater extent than in Britain. But the core problem is the balance between centralised, national- orientated policy-making on the one hand and local political participation and voluntary action on the other.

Endnotes

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Conservative Party Membership; R000234350, Changes over Time in the Recruitment, Activities and Attitudes of Conservative Party Members; R000237789, A Study of Liberal Democrat Party Members.

2. Membership itself is a somewhat ambiguous term and varies according to party. For example, the barriers to entry to the Labour party were historically higher than to the Conservative party.

Interestingly, in recent years Labour has eased its barriers while the Conservatives have raised theirs. In interpreting Table 1, it should also be noted that membership-record keeping was the responsibility, until recent years, of constituency officers, most of whom were volunteers and amateurs, which leads one to doubt the accuracy of the numbers published. Only with the introduction of national membership records by the Labour party in 1998, by the Conservative party in 1999, and the Liberal Democrats from their formation in 1988 can one feel more confident of their accuracy. Nevertheless, the trend decline is certainly accurate.

3. See Labour Party Conference Report, 1992, pp. 74-5, where Clare Short draws attention to the importance of party members in campaigning. See also NEC Report, 1992, p.68.

4. The wording of all the questions referred to in tables 3 to 5 appear in the appendix.

5. For example, the poll tax and one person one vote for the election of the party leader.

6. The joint policy committee is chaired by the Prime Minister and is composed of eight members of the government and the NEC respectively and three elected members from the national policy forum.

7. The national policy forum is made up of 175 members, elected for two years, representing constituency parties (54), regional parties (18), trade unions (30), the PLP (9), the EPLP (6), the government (8), local government (9), and socialist societies, the cooperative party and black socialist societies (9). In addition, all 32 members of the NEC are automatically members.

8. Eight policy commissions, composed of three representatives each from government, NEC and the national policy forum respectively, have been established covering the following subjects: economic and social affairs, trade and industry, environment, transport and the regions, health, education and employment, crime and justice, democracy and citizenship and, finally, Britain in the world.

Table 1 **Individual Membership of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in Britain 1983-1998**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Liberal Democrats*</i>
1950	908,161	2,805,000**	—
1960	790,192	—	—
1970	680,191	1,750,000	234,345
1980	348,156	—	—
1983	295,344	1,200,000	145,258
1984	323,292	---	100,000
1985	313,099	—	---
1986	297,364	—	---
1987	288,829	1,000,000	79,500
1988	265,927	1,000,000	58,000
1989	293,723	750,000	82,000
1990	311,152	—	---
1991	261,233	—	---
1992	279,530	500,000	100,000
1993	266,270	—	---
1994	305,189	—	---
1995	365,110	—	---
1996	400,465	—	---
1997	405,238	400,000	100,000
1998	387,776	204,000	---

Sources: Labour Party - Labour Party National Executive Committee Reports; Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats - Katz and Mair, 1992: 847, Webb and Farrell, 1999: 48, Webb, 2000: 193 and Butler and Butler, 1994. In addition, the 1988 figure for the Liberal Democrats is estimated on the basis of the numbers voting to elect a new Leader. The 1998 figure for the Conservatives is based on the numbers participating in the ballot on the party's European strategy.

*Note that the Liberal Party 1983-88 became the Liberal Democrats in 1988.

** refers to 1953.

Table 2 Party Members Reasons for Joining their Party

‘People join Labour (Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats) for a variety of different reasons. How about you, what was your most important reason for joining the Labour (Conservative, Liberal Democrat) party?’

	<i>Labour (1997)</i>	<i>Conservatives (1992)</i>	<i>Liberal Democrats (1999)</i>
The party leadership	4	3	3
Party policies	4	12	15
Party principles	35	22	37
To oppose other parties	11	14	13
To be politically active in the party	2	0	3
To support the party	14	8	9
To help the party locally	1	3	12
To be better informed about politics	1	0	1
To have an influence on the party	1	2	1
The influence of friends and family	2	11	4
The influence of a trade union	2	0	0
To make a commitment to Socialism	13	0	0
The influence of Conservative clubs	0	5	0
Other factors	10	21	2

Table 3 Attitude Structures of Labour Party Members 1997

	A	B	C	D
Stricter laws to regulate trade unions	0.76			
Less trade union power is a good thing	0.75			
Trade union - party affiliation	0.67			
Left-right scale for party	-0.49	0.42		
Production best left to free market	0.48			
Capture the middle ground	0.47	-0.42		
Left-right scale in Britain	-0.47		0.43	
Party leader is too powerful		0.70		
Leader does not pay attention to members		0.68		
Labour party no longer socialist		0.63		
Easing of immigration rules			0.68	
More aid to poor countries			0.68	
Resist European Union integration			-0.60	
Agree with European currency			0.59	
High income tax deters work			-0.42	
Retain nuclear weapons			-0.42	
Put more money into the NHS				0.69
Spend more money to eliminate poverty				0.67
Privatised industries re-nationalised				0.47
Nationalisation versus privatisation				0.46
Class struggle central to UK politics				0.51
<i>Eigenvalues</i>	<i>4.9</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>1.3</i>
<i>Total variance explained</i>	<i>23.2</i>	<i>10.9</i>	<i>6.8</i>	<i>6.2</i>

A: Trade unions and the economy

B: Leadership and socialism

C: Internationalism

D: Collectivism and class

Table 4 Attitude Structures of Conservative Party Members 1992

Indicator	A	B	C	D
Spend more on poverty	0.66			
Protect consumers from free markets	0.60			
Introduce a prices & incomes policy	0.59			
Spend more on the NHS	0.59			
Make unemployment benefit reasonable	0.57			
Redistribute income & wealth	0.53			
Capture middle ground of politics	0.53			
Give workers more say in workplace	0.51			
Regulate privatized industries	0.50			
Introduce proportional representation	0.41			
Encourage private education		0.69		
Encourage private medicine		0.67		
Markets in the NHS improve the service		0.57		
Privatize British Coal		0.55		
Introduce stricter trade union laws		0.49		
Left-right scale for Conservatives		-0.46	-0.50	
Left-right scale for British politics		-0.45		
Cut income tax		0.43		
Reintroduce the death penalty			0.67	
Encourage repatriation of Immigrants			0.62	
Resist further European Integration			0.55	
Give more foreign aid			-0.52	
Abolish Child Benefit			0.46	
Make abortion more difficult				0.76
Divorce is too easy				0.70
All shops should open on Sundays				-0.59

<i>Eigenvalues</i>	3.82	3.15	1.70	1.58
<i>Total variance Explained</i>	14.7	12.1	6.5	6.1

- A Progressivism
- B Individualism
- C General Traditionalism
- D Moral Traditionalism

Table 5 Attitude Structures of Liberal Democrat Party Members in 1999

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>
Film & magazine censorship is necessary	0.62			
Govt should discourage 1 parent families	0.61			
Cannabis use should be legal	-0.62			
Homosexuality is always wrong	0.75			
Govt should make abortion more difficult	0.70			
Income & wealth should be redistributed		0.67		
Reduce taxes and spend less on services		-0.57		
Give more aid to Asia & Africa		0.57		
Spend more money to get rid of poverty		0.74		
Production is best left to the free market			0.78	
Individuals should provide for themselves			0.56	
Private enterprise is best for economy			0.80	
Lib-Democrats should resist EU integration				0.81
UK should agree to the EU single currency				-0.85
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>1.7</i>
<i>Total Variance Explained</i>	<i>17.0</i>	<i>12.9</i>	<i>12.0</i>	<i>12.0</i>

- A:** Lifestyle liberalism-conservatism
- B:** Social Democratic Redistribution
- C:** Free Market liberalism-conservatism
- D:** Attitudes to the European Community

**Table 6 Attitudes of Labour Party Members in 1997 and 1999
to Methods of Policy-Making**

<i>Method of Policy-Making preferred:</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>
Policy formed by the Party Leadership and Endorsed by a postal vote of Members	45	37
Policy formed by the Annual Conference	18	25
Policy formed at Regional and National Policy Forums	37	39

**Table 7 Attitudes of Labour and Liberal Democrat Party Members
to their Policy-Making Roles in 1999**

		<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
The role of the party member is to support decisions made by the leadership	<i>Labour</i>	7	24	18	37	15
	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	4	32	24	34	6
Party members lack the knowledge necessary to make policy	<i>Labour</i>	4	25	18	40	14
	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	2	19	20	50	9
The party conference should be the ultimate source of authority in the Labour/Liberal Democrat party	<i>Labour</i>	14	30	21	29	6
	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	7	36	24	30	4
A problem with the Labour/Liberal Democrat party today is that the leader is too powerful	<i>Labour</i>	14	23	19	36	7
	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	2	8	23	62	6

**Attitudes of Conservative Party Members
to their Policy-Making Roles in 1994**

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Party policies should be determined by party members	8	60	13	17	2
The party leadership does not pay a lot of attention to the views of ordinary party members	12	45	20	22	1

Appendix - Attitudinal Indicators in the Party Members surveys

Labour Party Attitudinal Indicators

The following statements used Likert scales (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

It is better for Britain when trade unions have little power.

Labour should adjust its policies to capture the middle ground of politics

The government should give more aid to poor countries in Africa and Asia

The production of goods and services is best left to the free market

Restrictions on immigration into Britain are too tight and should be ceased

The Labour party is no longer a socialist party because it has dropped its public ownership commitment

Labour should resist further moves to integrate the European Union

Britain should agree to the introduction of a common European currency

High income tax makes people less willing to work hard

Joining the Labour Party indirectly via a trade union should be abolished

A problem with the Labour party today is that the leader is too powerful

The party leadership doesn't pay a lot of attention to ordinary party members

The central question of British politics is the class struggle between labour and capital

Britain should have nuclear weapons as part of a western defence system

The public enterprises privatised by the Tory government should be returned to the public sector

The following indicators used scales varying from Definitely Should, Probably Should,

Doesn't Matter, Probably Should Not, to Definitely Should Not

Spend more money to get rid of poverty.

Put more money into the National Health Service.

Introduce stricter laws to regulate trade unions.

Finally, members were asked:

Are you generally in favour of:

More nationalisation of companies by government

More privatisation of companies by government

- or should things be left as they are now?

and

In Labour party politics, people often talk about 'the left' and 'the right'. Compared with other Labour Party members, where would you place your views on this scale below?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
LEFT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	RIGHT

And where would you place your views in relation to British politics as a whole (not just the Labour party)?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
LEFT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	RIGHT

Conservative Party Attitudinal Indicators

The following were Likert Scales

The Conservative party should adjust its policies to capture the middle ground of politics

The public enterprises privatised by the Conservative government should be subject to stricter regulation

The next Conservative government should establish a prices and incomes policy as a means of controlling inflation

A future Conservative government should privatise British Coal

Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary working people

A future Conservative government should encourage repatriation of immigrants

Introducing market forces into the NHS means that the quality of our health service will improve

All shops should be allowed to open on Sundays

A future Conservative government should make abortions more difficult to obtain

The consumer needs much stronger protection from the effects of the free market

Unemployment benefit should ensure people a reasonable standard of living

The death penalty should be reintroduced for murder

Britain's present electoral system should be replaced by a system of proportional representation

Conservatives should resist further moves to integrate the European Community

Child benefit should be abolished

The government should give more aid to poor countries

Divorce has become too easy these days, and the divorce laws should be tightened up

The following used five point scales from Definitely should to Definitely should not:

Encourage private education

Spend more money to get rid of poverty

Encourage the growth of private medicine

Put more money into the NHS

Introduce stricter laws to regulate the Trade Unions

Give workers more say in the places where they work

Cut income tax

The left-right scales were coded the same as in the Labour survey above.

Liberal Democrat Party Attitudinal Indicators

The following were coded as Likert scales:

The government should give more aid to poor countries in Africa and Asia

The production of goods and services is best left to the free market

Individuals should take responsibility for providing for themselves

Liberal Democrats should resist further moves to integrate the European Union

Britain should agree to the introduction of a common European currency

Income and wealth should be redistributed to ordinary working people

Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards

Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems

Homosexual relations are always wrong

The government should discourage the growth of one parent families

The government should make abortions more difficult to obtain

The taxes versus spending question was the same as in the Labour survey.

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