RULING THE VOID

The Hollowing of Western Democracy

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VERSO
London • New York

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THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE ELITES

On the face of it, we might expect that the popular withdrawal from conventional politics discussed in Chapter 1 would leave a lot of angry and frustrated politicians in its wake. Indeed, given how difficult it is becoming to engage citizens in the conventional political arena, we might well expect that party and political leaders would devote considerable effort to trying to keep politics alive and meaningful, even if only in theatrical terms. And, at a certain level, this has been happening. Rarely has there been such widespread discussion of institutional reform, be it of the electoral system, parliamentary procedures, local or regional government, plebiscitary mechanisms or whatever. Almost none of the European democracies has been untouched by these discussions, and almost all have devoted considerable research effort to discussing the limitations of their present institutional arrangements and the ways in which they might be changed – sometimes quite drastically. Moreover, the single thread that runs through almost all of these discussions in almost all of the countries concerned is that

reform is needed in order to bring government closer to the citizen. As Kaare Strøm and his colleagues conclude at the end of their long and exhaustive study of delegation and accountability in contemporary democracies, 'there is every reason to mind the gap between citizens and their political representatives.'[1] It was also what David Cameron, leader of the then opposition Conservatives, concluded in the wake of the MPs' expenses scandal that captured the headlines in Britain in early 2009: 'I believe the central objective of the new politics we need should be a massive, sweeping, radical redistribution of power. From the state to citizens; from the government to parliament; from Whitehall to communities. From the EU to Britain; from judges to the people; from bureaucracy to democracy. Through decentralisation, transparency and accountability we must take power away from the political elite and hand it to the man and woman in the street.'[2] It is in this sense that citizen discontent and disenchantment appear to prompt the elite to seek solutions through institutional change, as well as provoking quite pervasive official concern with how this ebbing of commitment might finally be stemmed.

That, at least, is how it appears on the surface. But along with the beating of official breasts and the show of distress at the hollowing out of mass politics, there exists in the practice of organized democracy a clear tendency to match citizen withdrawal with elite withdrawal. That is, just as citizens retreat to their own private and particularized spheres of interest, so too the political and party leaders retreat into their own version of this private and particular sphere, which is constituted by the closed world of the governing institutions.

1. See Strøm, Müller and Bergman (2003: 746).

2. 'David Cameron: I Would Reduce No 10's Power', *Guardian*, 26 May 2009, guardian.co.uk.

Disengagement is mutual, and for all the rhetoric that echoes on all sides, it is general.

THE CENTURY OF MASS POLITICS

In politics, just as in communications, culture and war, the twentieth century was the mass century. It is now more or less one hundred years since the last of the property qualifications that once limited the right to electoral participation began to be waived, such that in most west European democracies by the early 1900s elections were already, or soon would be, organized around the principle of mass democracy.[3] With mass democracy came the emergence of mass political parties. In some cases, the organization of these parties proceeded as a consequence of the democratization of elections – new waves of voters became available, and political parties, both old and new, sought to incorporate these new voters through the development of mass-membership organizations. In other cases, the mass parties had already been established, and it was often because of their pressure and insistence that the electoral arena had been expanded. Whatever the particular sequence, however, the coincidence was evident: mass democracies became associated with mass parties, which now became the defining party model for the new political age. Moreover, with the initial development of the mass party, political parties as such entered their golden age, an age in which, at least for a time, they dominated politics, constituting its principal point of reference.

3. It was, of course, initially a principle of mass male democracy, since voting rights for women were not usually granted until after World War I, and it was not until 1945 in France, 1948 in Belgium and as late as 1971 in Switzerland that women were allowed to participate and that universal and equal adult suffrage was finally achieved.

During this 'golden age', the mass parties in western Europe strove to establish more or less closed political communities, sustained by reasonably homogeneous electoral constituencies, strong and often hierarchical organizational structures and a coherent sense of partisan political identity. Voters, at least in the majority of cases, were believed to 'belong' to their parties, and rather than reflecting the outcome of a reasoned choice between the competing alternatives, the act of voting was seen instead as an expression of identity and commitment. As Richard Rose and Harve Mossawir (1967: 186) observed in an early review of voting studies, 'to speak of the majority of voters at a given election as "choosing" a party is nearly as misleading as speaking of a worshipper on a Sunday "choosing" to go to an Anglican, rather than a Presbyterian or Baptist church.' This was the politics of mass democracy as organized by mass parties, and one of the consequences of the rise of this party form was the relatively rapid stabilization or 'freezing' of collective political identities in the decades following the introduction of mass suffrage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

In the main, these closed political communities were built on a foundation of closed social communities, in which large collectivities of citizens shared distinct social experiences, whether these were defined in terms of occupation, working and living conditions, religious practices, to name the most important. These social collectivities were in their turn cemented by the existence of vibrant and effective social institutions, including trade unions, churches, social clubs and so on. In other words, the closure of political communities usually derived from, or was based on, social closure, which, in a variety of European countries, tended to create a pattern of widespread segmentation, dividing social groups from one another while uniting their own

individual 'members' and adherents. This is the process the Dutch have called 'pillarization', which was probably carried further in the Netherlands than in most other polities (see, for example, Lijphart, 1968; Houska, 1985). Viewing its operation elsewhere, we can see it as one in which political cleavage structures became consolidated (Bartolini and Mair, 1990: 212–49; Bartolini, 2000: 411–501).

At the same time, however, there was never any automatic or 'natural' translation of relevant social divisions into political oppositions and party formation. In and of themselves, for example, class structures largely failed to sustain a major socialist party in either the United States or Ireland, even though this development was the standardizing political experience in all other western democracies almost a century ago. Other social contrasts, and most notably gender, also failed in and of themselves to generate major political oppositions. Thus while social divisions helped to sustain political identities, they were not in themselves a sufficient precondition for the development of mass parties.

A second impetus was therefore usually required, and this came through the mass organizations themselves, and through the conscious intervention of party. In other words, by actively mobilizing citizens into a set of collective political identities, the political parties themselves helped to construct their own independent networks of partisan loyalties. Organizational intervention was crucial here, for in supplanting the loose-knit parties of notables that had flourished in the period prior to mass suffrage, the new parties approached their supporters with claims that, as Sigmund Neumann (1956: 404) put it, were 'incomparably greater' than those made by those earlier parties, in that they began to demand 'an increasing influence over all spheres of the individual's daily life'. And it was to be the interaction

of both of these forces – social closure, on the one hand, and organizational intervention or encapsulation, on the other – that anchored the new mass parties and stabilized their support networks.

This, indeed, had always been the great strength of the classic west European mass parties in the early decades of the century, in that they managed to cement the loyalties of their voters by building strong organizational networks on the basis of shared social experiences. Organizational effort plus social closure spelt political identity and political endurance. In practice, of course, the strength of political identities varied both within and across countries, as did the relative balance between organizational effort and social closure. The British Labour party, for example, was built on the basis of a very powerful class identity, but always remained relatively weak in organizational terms, preferring to develop as a sort of federal party to which local organizations and trade unions could become affiliated. At the opposite extreme was the neighbouring Irish Fianna Fáil party, whose support patterns have always revealed few if any social correlates, but which built a strong and stable following on the basis of a strictly political appeal, on the one hand, and a powerful organizational network, on the other. The classic example of the combination of social closure and organizational effort was that of the Social Democrats in imperial Germany (Roth, 1963), who combined strong class support with a party network that genuinely attempted to forge 'cradle-to-grave' encapsulation. In France, by contrast, neither the social nor the organizational impetus proved particularly powerful, and the political parties that emerged, even on the left, tended to be more fissiparous and ephemeral.

Parties in this golden age were marked also by their mutual distinctiveness. Differences were conspicuous. As we have seen, each party had, or hoped to develop,

its own 'natural' constituency within the wider society. Each had a distinct programme designed to reflect the interests of that constituency. Each sought to mobilize its own organizational resources, whether through its members or adherents, or through its own affiliated organizations, or through associated sponsors. Each maintained its own separate lines of communication, whether through a private party press or through the unequivocal partisan support of a national daily newspaper. Ideally, each hoped to form its own single-party government, or, should that prove impossible because of excessive fragmentation, to share government only with one or two like-minded competitors. In other words, and precisely because these parties maintained such distinct clienteles, representational integrity was a priority. They constituted the political voice of their constituencies, and derived both their strength and their legitimacy from that relationship.

The result was that European democracy became synonymous with party democracy, and European government with party government.[4] Within one agency or one institution, party guaranteed the two key constitutive elements of democracy: representation, on the one hand, and hence government *by* the people; and procedural legitimacy, on the other hand, or government *for* the people. In other words, parties – or at least the classic mass party – gave voice to the people, while also ensuring that the institutions of government were accountable. The party was at once representative *and* governor, and hence constituted, as Rudolf Wildenmann (1986) once put it, 'the crucial agency of institutional legitimation'.

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4. See Francis G. Castles and Rudolf Wildenmann, eds., *Visions and Realities of Party Government*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986; and Jean Blondel and Maurizio Cotta (eds.), *The Nature of Party Government: A Comparative European Perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000.

The golden age of party has now passed, and one of the principal purposes of this book is to analyse some of the causes and implications of this great change of political condition. As for the passing itself, we can probably date the first major step in the process back to the middle 1960s, when Otto Kirchheimer (1966) drew attention to the rise of the new catch-all people's party, a more competitive model that tried to undo the old emphasis on strong representational links, seeking to exchange 'effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success.' These new-style postwar parties were to adopt a more aggressive approach to elections, attempting to win often short-term and contingent support far beyond the limits of their once pre-defined constituencies. They were also to become primarily office-seeking parties, with the desire to occupy government winning priority over any sense of representational integrity. Office mattered, as did electoral success, and the elaboration of party programmes, policies and strategies was increasingly attuned to this overriding competitive goal.

The changes in the forms of party politics that followed from the emergence of the catch-all party and its later successors, as well as the transformation in the patterns of party competition with which these changes can now be associated, may be specified under two broad headings: the *political identity* of parties, which has already been discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of party government, and their *location*, which is the main concern of the present one, and by which I mean to mark a process of *re*-location. The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual but also inexorable withdrawal of the parties from the realm of civil society towards the realm of government and the state, and together, these two processes have led to a situation in which each party tends to become more distant

from the voters that it purports to represent while at the same time tending to become more closely associated with the alternative protagonists against which it purports to compete. Party–voter distances have become more stretched, while party–party differences have shrunk, with both processes combining to reinforcing a growing popular indifference to parties and, potentially, to the world of politics in general. This also becomes one of the sources of the growing popular distrust of parties and of political institutions more generally.

FROM CIVIL SOCIETY TO THE STATE: THE LOCATION OF PARTIES

Although there is some dispute among observers about how the recent transformation of parties may best be understood, and particularly the further develoment from the catch-all party to the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995), there is consensus about the two broadly defined underlying processes at work here.[5] First, party organizations, however defined, are now less well rooted within the wider society; and second, they are

5. 'The cartel party is a type that is postulated to emerge in democratic polities that are characterized by the interpenetration of party and state and by a tendency towards inter-party collusion. With the development of the cartel party, the goals of politics become self-referential, professional and technocratic, and what substantive inter-party competition remains becomes focused on the efficient and effective management of the polity. Competition between cartel parties focuses less on differences in policy and more – in a manner consistent with Manin's (1997: 193–235) notion of "audience democracy" – on the provision of spectacle, image and theatre. Above all, with the emergence of cartel parties, the capacity for problem-solving in public life becomes decreasingly politicized and is less and less embodied in the competition of political parties.' Peter Mair, from a draft chapter for a book in progress with Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and the Cartelization of Political Parties*, for Oxford University Press (Katz and Mair, forthcoming). [*Ed.*]

also now more strongly oriented towards government and the state. Thus, if we conceive of parties as standing somewhere between society and the state – the most obvious approach to understanding their role and location within a democratic polity – then we can suggest that they have shifted along the continuum from one to the other, moving from a position in which they were primarily defined as social actors – as in the classic mass party model – to one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors.

Evidence of the erosion of the parties' social roots is relatively easily adduced, and incorporates most of the trends already discussed. Electoral identification with political parties is now almost universally in decline, and the sense of attachment to party has been substantially eroded. Levels of party membership are now markedly lower than was the case even twenty years ago, and other evidence suggests that those members who remain within the parties tend to be less active and engaged. At the same time, the former privileges of membership have also tended to disappear, in that considerations of electoral success are now encouraging party leaders to look beyond their shrinking memberships to take their cues – and sometimes even their candidates – from the electorate at large. The voice of the ordinary voter is seen to be at least as relevant to the party organization as that of the active party member, and the views of focus groups often count more than those of conference delegates.

A tendency to dissipation and fragmentation also marks the broader organizational environment within which the classic mass parties used to nest. As workers' parties, or as religious parties, the mass organizations in Europe rarely stood on their own, but constituted just the core element within a wider and more complex organizational network of trade unions, churches and so on. Beyond the socialist and religious parties, additional

networks of farming groups, business associations and even social clubs combined with political organizations to create a generalized pattern of social and political segmentation that helped to root the parties in the society and to stabilize and distinguish their electorates. Over at least the past thirty years, however, these broader networks have been breaking up. In part, this is because of a weakening of the sister organizations themselves, with churches, trade unions and other traditional forms of association losing both members and strength of engagement. With the increasingly individualization of society, traditional collective identities and organizational affiliations count for less, including those that once formed part of party-centred networks.

But this is not the whole story, for party networks have also weakened as the result of a sharpening division of labour, with the parties themselves often seeking to loosen their ties to associated groups, and to downgrade the privileged access formerly accorded to affiliated organizations.[6] In other words, the landscape has also been changed by the increasing tendency of parties to think of themselves as self-sufficient and specialized political organizations, ready to heed cues from any of the range of social actors, but preferring to remain unrestricted by close formalized links with them. Parties have therefore distanced themselves from civil society and its social institutions, and at the same time become ever more inextricably caught up in the world of government and the state. This process of party change has been fully analysed elsewhere (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2002, 2009), and need not be detailed again here. Suffice it to summarize a number of key developments that have marked most western democracies in the last decades of

6. A trend already noted *in nuce* by Otto Kirchheimer (1966) in his then highly prescient analysis of party development in the advanced democracies. For a more recent evaluation, see Poguntke (2005).

the twentieth century and since, and which look likely to be reinforced in future generations.

First of all, as is now widely recognized, parties in most democracies have moved from a position in which they were principally dependent for their organizational survival on the resources provided by members, donors and affiliated organizations, to one in which they now increasingly rely on public funds and state support, such that in most countries today, and in particular in almost all newly established democracies, the preferred source of party funding has become the public purse. This operates in a variety of ways.[7] One is indirect: the state may classify private contributions to parties as tax-deductible, so giving a major boost to a party's fund-raising activities; or may provide benefits in kind, such as free access to public broadcasting networks, or free mailings or poster sites. In most cases, however, and even in those few remaining systems where the principle of public funding is still viewed with some suspicion, state support takes the form of direct subventions for the work of parties in the parliamentary arena. These include funds for research and information-gathering, and for the salaries of researchers, assistants and secretaries who work for the parliamentary party as a whole or for individual representatives. Though often not regarded as constituting political funding as such, these particular state aids often provide significant help, either directly or in kind, for party organizations. And to the extent that more and more of a party's activities are centred within parliament, these funds play an ever more important role in specifying the party identity and defining its role within the wider political system.

7. For a recent overview of the patterns involved and the guidelines used, see Ingrid van Biezen, *Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns – Guidelines*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2003.

To an increasing extent, direct public funding is also provided for party central offices in order to help staff and maintain organizational work between elections. This sort of funding is sometimes couched in terms designed to depoliticize its intent, so that it may be provided ostensibly to promote membership affiliation among minority groups or younger voters, or for educational work that might facilitate citizen engagement, and so on in this vein. In practice, however, this has become a key means by which public resources are provided for partisan organizational and campaigning work outside parliament, and in this case also it has often become an essential source of income for the parties concerned.

State money is also sometimes made available specifically for election campaigning, and for party work at local or regional level. In this case, the justifications refer to the importance of parties in the democratic process, as well as to the need for voters to receive as much information as possible before polling day. Whatever the proffered rationale, however, the end result is that more and more parties in the democratic world have become increasingly dependent on state subventions for their organizational survival. Without this public support, it is likely that many parties would have difficulty performing their parliamentary roles, or even maintaining their extra-parliamentary presence. It is in this sense that parties have become dependent on the state, and appear as agents of the state.

Second, parties are now increasingly subject to new state laws and regulations, which sometimes even determine the way in which their internal organization may function. Many of these regulations and party laws were first introduced or were substantially extended in the wake of the introduction of public funding for parties, with the offer of state subventions inevitably accompanied by the demand for a more strictly codified system

of party registration and control. Arrangements for party access to the public broadcasting media have also required a new system of regulation, which again acts to codify the status of parties and their range of activities. From having been largely 'private' and voluntary associations that had developed in the society and drew their legitimacy from that source, parties have therefore increasingly become subject to a regulatory framework whose effect is to accord them quasi-official status as part of the state. In other words, as the internal life and external activities of parties become regulated by public law, and as party rules become constitutional or administrative rules, the parties themselves become transformed into public service agencies, with a corresponding weakening of their own internal organizational autonomy (see Bartolini and Mair, 2001: 340).

The third and last aspect of this development is also perhaps the most obvious. Parties have also cemented their linkage to the state and to the public institutions by increasingly prioritizing their role as governing (rather than representative) agencies. In the terms adopted by the analysts of coalition formation, parties have become more office-seeking, with the winning of a place in government being now not only a standard expectation, but also an end in itself. Some forty years ago, a now-classic review of political developments in western democracies was organized around the theme of 'oppositions' (Dahl, 1966); nowadays, however, within the world of conventional party politics, there is less and less sense of enduring opposition, and more and more the idea of a temporary displacement from office. Opposition, when structurally constituted, now increasingly comes from outside conventional party politics, whether in the form of social movements, street politics, popular protests, boycotts and so on. Within politics, on the other hand, the parties are either governing or waiting to govern.

They are now all in office. And with this new status has come also a shift in their internal organizational structures, with the downgrading of the role of the 'party on the ground', and an evident enhancement of the role of the party in the institutions. In other words, within party organizations, there has been a shift in the party centre of gravity towards those elements and actors that serve the needs of the party in parliament and in government; as Maurizio Cotta (2000: 207) notes, 'those who control the government appear to be better able than in the past to also control from that position the whole party'. This shift might also be seen as a final manifestation of the classic Downsian or Schumpeterian notion of parties as 'competing teams of leaders', in which the party organization outside the institutions of the polity, and the party on the ground in all its various manifestations, gradually wither away. What we see is 'the ascendancy of the party in public office' (Katz and Mair, 2002). What remains is a governing class.

THE FUNCTIONS OF PARTIES

All of this has had major implications for the functions that parties perform, and are seen to perform, within the wider polity. As most students of party politics know, much of the literature in the field has laid particular stress on understanding the crucial functions that parties can be expected to perform in democracies.[8] Moreover, with some minor variation, there has been a remarkable degree of consensus about what precisely these functions are. Parties are seen to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry; to articulate and aggregate interests, and then to translate these into public policy;

8. Beginning with Almond (1960) and King (1969).

to recruit and promote political leaders, and to organize the parliament, the government and the key institutions of the state. That is, just as parties aimed to combine government for the people with government by the people, so too they combined key representative functions with key procedural functions – all within the same agency. Without parties, it was commonly argued, and without this combination of crucial functions, both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of conventional systems of representative government could be undermined.

In the main, however, the picture that has been presented in this approach to the understanding of political parties has also proved to be very static, being fixated on an image of the mass party as something both normatively and practically desirable. However, as parties have changed, and as the mass party model has passed away, the functions that parties can – or do – perform in contemporary politics have also been rebalanced. Indeed, as I will suggest here, the evidence points to the development from a time in which parties did manage to combine both representative and procedural functions to one in which they emphasize procedural functions alone. This development goes hand in hand with the concurrent relocation of parties from civil society to the state, and is therefore also part of the process by which parties and their leaders exit from the arena of popular democracy. Let us look at it more closely.

One of the first functions usually associated with political parties is that of helping to integrate and mobilize the citizenry in the polity within which the parties compete. This is, or was, one of their classic representative functions, particularly vital at a time when distinctions based on property ceased to be necessary qualifications for the right to vote, and the mass of citizens were first admitted to full rights of participation in the political world. In these circumstances, it became very important

for parties not only 'to organize public opinion and to communicate demands to the centre of governmental power' but also to 'articulate to its followers the concept and meaning of the broader community'(Lapalombara and Weiner, 1966: 3). Party-led integration involved giving voice to previously excluded communities while also emphasizing their part in the larger whole. Today, however, such a role is more or less redundant, in that neither integration nor mobilization may any longer be deemed necessary, especially within the more advanced democracies. As Alessandro Pizzorno (1981) first suggested, this function has proved historically contingent. The bulk of the citizenry is already fully integrated, and has already acquired whatever political identity is deemed important. Indeed, the basis for contemporary integration and identity formation is in any case now more individualistic and particularistic, and hence less and less amenable to the traditional encapsulating strategies of political parties. Even to the extent that processes of mass integration or mobilization might still be seen as conducive to democratic consolidation – and this argument might be considered applicable to newly emerging democracies, or to the European Union polity – they are unlikely to be accomplished by either parties or their equivalents.[9] In sum, while parties may be important in other respects, this particular task no longer forms an essential – or even effective – part of their repertoire.

The second key representative function classically associated with parties is as articulator and aggregator of social and political interests present within the wider

9. This is also more or less what Philippe Schmitter (2001: 85) concludes after an assessment of the potential role of parties in consolidating third-wave democracies: 'Under contemporary conditions, there may be no way to get [the parties] right – if by "right" one means that they should be capable of ... playing a role comparable to that which they played in earlier processes of democratization.'

society. That is, parties give voice to citizens, and also create packages of policies in which various conflicts or incongruities in popular interests can be reconciled within coherent and competing partisan programmes. The aggregation of diverse but related interests into broad political programmes was always one of the key tasks of the traditional mass party, of course, but the articulation of interests was never their exclusive preserve, since this was also effected by non-party interests such as unions, churches, professional associations and the like. Nevertheless, at least during the heyday of the mass party, even those alternative associations and non-party movements that did serve to articulate interests usually operated under the aegis of party, or within the broader party-centred networks of representation. Indeed, this was the basis of traditional cleavage or 'pillarized' politics. In contemporary democracies, in contrast, the party and non-party channels of representation have become increasingly distinct from one another, leading to a new division of labour that has become one of the defining features in the patterns of representation in post-industrial democracy. This is especially true when the interests being articulated are more particularized and the channels of representation become more specialized and narrow-cast. In these circumstances, the parties have often aimed for self-sufficiency, and hence have relied less on their formalized links to non-party associations. At the same time, the various non-party associations have often found it preferable to compete for influence in the marketplace, and to play contending parties or political representatives off against one another. On both sides, therefore, the idea of a party-centred network has been proving less and less attractive or meaningful.[10]

10. The most comprehensive analysis of changing party-group linkages is to be found in Thomas Poguntke, *Parteienorganisatie im Wandel: Gesellschaftliche Verankerung und organisatorische Anpassung im europäischen Vergleich*. Weisbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000. See also Poguntke (2005).

But if the articulation of interests has often been pursued beyond party control, what of the more broadly based aggregation process? One possible reading of the changes that are occurring here is that while aggregation can still be considered important, in that at some political level conflicting demands still have to be reconciled, this can now be usually effected through the formulation of public policy and regulations rather than by means of a partisan programme as such. Rather than occurring within the electoral process, in which it is the parties in particular that would seek 'to organize the chaotic public will' (Neumann, 1956: 396), aggregation now occurs after elections, in the formulation of public policy and in government itself. Indeed, this was the key motif in much of the propaganda that built up around the 'Third Way' in the late 1990s, with government policies being designed to offer 'win-win' solutions rather than 'win-lose' alternatives (e.g., Giddens, 1998): when politics becomes non-partisan, this sense of representation, and hence aggregation, evaporates.[11] The contemporary equivalent of interest aggregation can also be achieved in yet another and even more depoliticized fashion through the delegation of decision-making to such non-majoritarian institutions as judges, regulatory agencies and the like.

In sum, party as such appears less and less necessary to processes of interest representation, aggregation or intermediation. The articulation of popular interests and demands now occurs more and more often outside the party world, with the preferred role of parties being that

11. Note Tony Blair's remarks about 'what works' in an interview with Polly Toynbee and Michael White in the *Guardian* of 29 May 2001: 'I will always pursue political change in a way that tries to bring people together... We have become the practical party, pursuing perfectly idealistic objectives in a measured and non-dogmatic way.'

of the receiver of signals that emanate from the media or the wider society. These are certainly the terms of reference that were adopted in 2000 by the then Labour chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, when he rejected a trade-union proposal to restore the link between pensions and average earnings, a proposal that had just won the support of a large majority at the Labour party conference. 'I'm not going to give in to the proposal that came from the union leaders today', Brown declared. 'It is for the country to judge, it is not for a few composite motions [at party conference] to decide the policy of this government and this country. It is for the whole community, and I'm listening to the whole community.'[12] So conceived, the traditional representative role of the mass party eventually wastes away. Or perhaps it gets turned on its head, so that, as Rudy Andeweg suggests, 'the party ... becomes the government's representative in the society rather than the society's bridgehead in the state' – the party as spin doctor, as it were.[13]

But the work of social representation is not all that these parties did, or were expected to do. They also have a key procedural role, and here too there are two crucial functions involved. The first of these procedural functions involves the recruitment of political leaders and the staffing of public offices. If by this is implied that parties will always ensure the initial enrolment and socialization of potential political leaders, as well as their subsequent career path within the party network, then even this party function may have become hollowed out with time, in that parties in both old and new democracies seem increasingly willing to look beyond their immediate organizational confines when searching for suitable candidates and nominees. Indeed, with the

12. Quoted by Michael White, 'Angry Brown defies unions', *Guardian*, 28 September 2000.

13. See Andeweg (2000: 140).

decline in party membership levels, parties often have little choice but to look elsewhere, and, as the organizational strength and standing of parties diminishes, the candidates who are recruited are more often those who have achieved recognition in other fields. Parties in this sense have much less status or autonomy than before. Honoured in a minimalist way, however, in the sense that a party affiliation or party endorsement, however briefly or even opportunistically acquired, is seen as a necessary element in the election or nomination of candidates to public office, this function obviously continues to be crucial. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger felt the need for the Republican label in his successful campaign for the governorship of California.

Political patronage emerges as one of the key functions that parties still perform. Indeed, in certain political systems, where patronage appointments have grown in importance, or where, as a result of devolution in the United Kingdom, for example, the number of elected offices has increased, it might be argued that this particular function has become even more important. Parties have more positions at their disposal. However weakened party organization may have become, a party label remains a necessary acquisition on the pathway to political power, and within the institutional arenas of power themselves the actors are more and more likely to be professional – party – politicians, a strengthening trend not only for parliaments, but also for governments, with most European countries showing a steady decline from the 1950s through to the 1980s in the proportion of government ministers recruited through non-party channels (Krouwel, 1999: 210–15). Not only do parties still recruit, at this level, but they now seem to do so more extensively than ever.[14]

14. As Klaus von Beyme (1996: 153) notes, 'Elite recruitment [has become] by far the most important function in postmodern systems.'

The second procedural function that needs highlighting is that assigned to parties in the organization of parliament and government. This is potentially the most important function that they are required to perform, and yet, perhaps because of an American bias in the relevant literature, and because of the excessive attention paid to parties in presidential regimes, it is often overlooked. In systems of parliamentary government, the necessity for parties is self-evident. Governments in such systems need to be formed in the first place, often through coalition negotiations between potential competitors; responsibilities in government then need to be allocated across different departments or ministries; and, once formed, the maintenance of these governments in office requires the continuance of more or less disciplined support in parliament. None of these crucial tasks is feasible without the authority and organizing capacities of political parties.[15] Moreover, and even within presidential or semi-presidential systems, parties also facilitate the organization of legislative procedures, the functioning of legislative committees, and day-to-day agreements on the legislative agenda. There is little to suggest that the importance of this function has declined over time – and it is really only since the end of the 1980s that scholars in America have begun to emphasize its importance even on Capitol Hill (e.g., Cox and McCubbins, 2007).

The conclusion that can be drawn from this general overview of party functions is clear, and wholly consistent with the earlier assessment of the changing location of parties: the representative functions of parties are wasting away or being at least partly absorbed by other

15. For a comprehensive recent evaluation, see Bergman et al. (2003); see also Lieven DeWinter, 'Parties and government formation, portfolio allocation, and policy definition', in Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002), 171–206.

agencies, whereas their procedural functions have been maintained and sometimes become more relevant. In other words, the functions that parties do perform, are seen to perform, and are expected to perform, have changed from combining representative and governing roles to relying almost exclusively on a governing role. This is the final passing of the traditional mass party.

The key element within this transformation, whether seen in terms of the location of the parties within the polity, or in terms of the functions parties are expected to perform, is the ascendancy of the party in public office. Parties have reduced their presence in the wider society and become part of the state. They have become agencies that govern – in the widest sense of the term – rather than represent. They bring order rather than give voice. It is in this sense that we can also speak of the disengagement or withdrawal of the elites. For despite the rhetoric, it seems that they too are heading for the exits, although with this obvious difference: while the exiting citizens are often headed towards a more privatized or individualized world, the exiting political elites are retreating into an official world – a world of public offices.

The safe havens that are being sought in the wake of the passing of the mass party may be different; the withdrawal is mutual, however, and this is the conclusion that needs to be most clearly underlined. It is not that the citizens are disengaging and leaving hapless politicians behind, or that politicians are retreating and leaving voiceless citizens in the lurch. Both sides are withdrawing, and hence rather than thinking in terms of a linear sequence in which one of the movements leads to the other, and hence in which only one side is assumed to be responsible for the ensuing gap – the crude populist interpretation – it makes much more sense to think of a process of mutual reinforcement. The elites are inclined

to withdraw to the institutions as a defence against the uncertainties of the electoral market. Just as state subventions to political parties have compensated for the inability of parties to raise sufficient resources from their own members and supporters, so the security of an institutional or procedural role can compensate elites for their vulnerability in dealing with an increasingly disengaged and random electorate. At the same time, citizens withdraw from parties and a conventional politics that no longer seem to be part of their own world: traditional politics is seen less and less as something that belongs to the citizens or to the society, more and more as something done by politicians. There is a world of the citizens – or a host of particular worlds of the citizens – and a world of the politicians and parties, and the interaction between them steadily diminishes. Citizens change from participants into spectators, while the elites win more and more space in which to pursue their own particular interests. The result is the beginning of a new form of democracy, one in which the citizens stay at home while the parties get on with governing.

4

POPULAR DEMOCRACY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION POLITY

The widespread drift towards forms of decision-making that eschew electoral accountability and popular democratic control, in Europe and elsewhere, furnishes us with a context in which the European Union's 'democratic deficit' may best be understood. Despite its evident idiosyncrasies, the EU should not be seen as particularly exceptional or sui generis, but rather as a political system that has been constructed by national political leaders as a protected sphere in which policy-making can evade the constraints imposed by representative democracy. The scale of the European construct may be unique and without precedent, but the rationale that underlies it conforms closely to current thinking about the role of non-majoritarian institutions, on the one hand, and about the putative drawbacks of popular democracy, on the other. To study the EU in isolation is to miss this wider, and increasingly relevant picture. The fact that conventional forms of democracy and representative government are difficult to apply at the level of the EU is not so much exceptional as symptomatic, and if the