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PARTYLESS DEMOCRACY

Solving the Paradox of New Labour?

A CERTAIN TENSION LIES at the heart of New Labour's style of government. On the one hand, the Blair government has been engaged, almost from its first day in office, in what amounts to a constitutional revolution, dispersing power across a variety of new institutions, and confounding the traditional reliance on single-party government by a new emphasis on cross-party alliances. On the other, the Labour leadership seems set on establishing a degree of control within its own party without precedent in modern British political history. At the institutional level, pluralism holds sway. Within the party itself, only one voice may be heard.

In the second edition of his valuable *Progressive Dilemma*, David Marquand explores this tension at some length.[1] For Marquand, this Blair 'paradox' is both intriguing and contradictory: although the current party leaders 'have imposed a Prussian discipline on their own followers, exceeding anything attempted by any previous Labour leadership . . . the logic [of their constitutional reforms] is pluralistic, and the end product will be a series of checks and balances at variance with the tacit assumptions of the democratic-collectivist tradition.' For Marquand therefore, 'it is not clear whether Blair and his colleagues understand what they are doing'.[2] Political strategies often lead to unintended consequences, and new governments are particularly prone to misjudgement. Strategic fallibility might therefore seem a reasonable hypothesis: the advancement of Labour control of the political process may be the endgame, and constitutional reform simply the wrong strategy. With time, it might be believed, the Labour leadership will become aware of the contradiction

and learn from their mistakes. The commitment to institutional pluralism will be reined in, and the party will revert to a more traditional style of governing—or see power slip from its grasp.

There is an alternative hypothesis, however, which not only begins to make sense of the apparent paradox but also knits together the approach to internal party discipline and external constitutional renewal as part of a wider, more coherent, and quite deliberate strategy aimed at transforming democratic governance. At its core, this new strategy is designed not to promote party government but rather to eliminate it: instead of seeking to enhance partisan control, New Labour strategy seems directed towards the creation of a partyless and hence depoliticized democracy. Ensuring that all Labour representatives are on message is not in contradiction to this: it is a necessary first stage. The process by which the current Labour leadership has sought to eliminate internal party dissent—marginalizing representative procedures inside the party, introducing plebiscitarian techniques, going over the heads of the party conference and the activist layer in favour of widespread membership ballots—is well known. Appeals to the 'ordinary' party member, and internal mandates on the basis of individualized postal ballots, have ensured a more deferential and permissive consensus inside the party. Through 'democratization', the leadership hoped to smother dissent—although later, when even ordinary party members seemed recalcitrant, the leadership had no qualms about resorting to more manipulative techniques to ensure their intended results. Thus other key steps included attempts to engineer the outcome of elections to the party executive and so ensure that candidates selected for Westminster, the European Parliament and the newly devolved national assemblies in Scotland and

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[1] David Marquand, 'Progressive or Populist? The Blair Paradox', in *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair*, 2nd edition, London 1999, pp. 225–46.

[2] Other commentators have suggested that the tensions evident in the New Labour strategy stem at least partly from obligations inherited from former Labour leader John Smith, instancing the commitment to Scottish and Welsh devolution as the key example of this older Labour legacy—see, for example, Ross McKibbin, 'Mondeo Man in the Driving Seat', *London Review of Books*, 30 September 1999, and Will Hutton, 'The control-freak gets his comeuppance', *Observer*, 13 February 2000. As I suggest below, however, New Labour's commitment to constitutional reform goes much further than this, and to argue that Blair and his colleagues are simply lumbered with past commitments is to underestimate both the seriousness and the reach of the current reform programme.

Wales, as well as those elected to the party executive itself, would be those most willing to follow Millbank's lead. Meanwhile, within these institutions themselves, the leadership's control of members' behaviour has increasingly reflected 'the Prussian discipline' to which Marquand refers. Even the traditional regard for Westminster has withered, as Anthony Barnett has recently pointed out,[3] while collective decision-making has been further eroded by the downgrading of the Cabinet—which now scarcely functions—and through a renewed emphasis on more specialized government committees. Echoing the rallying call of fascist Italy, albeit now in a democratic discourse, what we see in this modern guise is a case of *un partito, una voce*.

Dismantling majoritarian democracy

At the same time, the first three years of New Labour government have been marked by a very substantial commitment to institutional pluralism, and a distinct and unprecedented shift towards consensus democracy. Traditionally, the British system of government has enjoyed a unique status among the advanced democracies by virtue of its unequivocally majoritarian features. Arend Lijphart, in what has now become a standard approach to the classification of democracies, has drawn a crucial distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies,[4] with the former being characterized by the centralization and exclusive partisan control of political power, and the latter reflecting a commitment to shared decision-making among a range of different political actors across a plurality of institutions. Lijphart's distinction was built deliberately on the exceptionalism of the British case, with the majoritarian model of democracy being typified by the institutions and practices then associated with the Westminster system: the majoritarian model was characterized by a unitary state, single-party government, a majority voting system, the absence of a written constitution or a process of judicial review, and the concentration of parliamentary power within a single legislative chamber. It was also characterized by a fusion of powers in

[3] See Anthony Barnett, 'Parliament in Flux II: Busy Doing Nothing', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 February 2000.

[4] Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, New Haven 1984. The model has been subsequently revised and extended in Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven 1999.

which the executive branch of government, while ostensibly responsible to parliament, effectively dominated the legislative branch.

Since coming to power in 1997 Labour has done much to dismantle this traditionally majoritarian system of government and has moved the UK substantially closer to Lijphart's alternative model of consensus democracy. The devolution of substantial decision-making powers to Scotland and Wales has undermined the unitary nature of the British state; the promise of regional devolution within England, together with the restoration of a single democratically elected authority to London, will take the decentralization process further—perhaps even to the extent that various English regional parliaments will work together with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in a multi-level federation. The majority voting system has already been abandoned for the regional assemblies and for European elections, and some form of proportional representation may even be adopted for Westminster elections. The incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British domestic law brings the UK closer than at any time in history to an internal system of judicial review. The abolition of the voting rights of hereditary peers offers the potential for the creation of a more legitimate, and hence more active, House of Lords—perhaps promising a more genuine bicameralism. Finally, through the inclusion of Liberal Democrats in key cabinet committees, and an emphasis on the desirability of closer Lib-Lab co-operation, the Blair government has taken the first serious steps away from the wholesale reliance on single-party government—despite its own massive parliamentary majority. These are the new 'checks and balances' to which Marquand refers, and however much they may be at variance with 'the tacit assumptions of the democratic-collectivist tradition' they certainly differ from the traditional emphases of majoritarian democracy. Indeed, the only key element within the majoritarian model that New Labour seems intent on maintaining is that of executive domination over parliament, even though the devolution of power to regional assemblies and moves towards judicial review will clearly temper the efforts of the executive to exert control within the wider political system.

The structure of consensus democracy involves the dispersal of power across a variety of institutions with varying political majorities; it therefore runs decidedly counter to the traditional British notion that a single party, in possession of majority control in parliament, govern with refer-

ence only to itself. More than two hundred years ago it was precisely the capacity of such institutional pluralism to counteract majority partisan control that so endeared the proposed American constitution to the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. For James Madison, the value of the then novel republican constitution lay in its capacity to prevent a system in which 'the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.'[5] And since, for Madison, it was more or less impossible to do anything to cure these 'mischiefs of faction', the best strategy was to seek to control their effects. Hence the need to separate and disperse the exercise of political power across different institutions, whose incumbents would be given 'the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others . . . Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place.'[6]

Evading party?

Consensus democracy is therefore not only an alternative to majoritarian democracy but also antithetical to the emphasis on British-style partisan democracy—at least as this has been conceived within British political culture. It is in this sense that New Labour's promotion of institutional pluralism, together with its deliberate fostering of cross-party alliances, can be seen to limit the potential for majority party control. In Madison's terms, the Blair project is seeking to limit the effects of faction. It is easy to conceive this new commitment to institutional pluralism as sitting uneasily—and paradoxically—with concurrent attempts to eliminate internal party dissent and to deny intra-party diversity. What is being given with one hand—the new checks and balances—appears to be taken away with the other, through the top-down control of inter-

[5] *Federalist No. 10*, as published in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, with an introduction by Clinton Rossiter, New York 1961, p. 77.

[6] *Federalist No. 51*, pp. 321–2. Elsewhere (*Federalist No. 47*, p. 301) Madison famously notes that 'the accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.' See also the discussion of Madisonian democracy in Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and Elections*, New York 1997, pp. 53–6.

nal party life. The question then becomes, why bother? If overall party control is sought, why should power be dispersed? Or if power is being dispersed, why close down internal party pluralism? Or again, if the goal is to establish something akin to consensus democracy and political power-sharing, why place so much emphasis on party management and political engineering? It hardly seems enough to suggest that Blair and his colleagues don't know what they're doing.

Part of the problem lies in understanding the purpose party control is intended to serve. On the face of it, the emphasis on organizational discipline could be seen as being directed towards the strengthening of the party position. *Un partito, una voce* seems to imply a stronger, more purposive partisanship. Looked at more critically, however, it might also be seen as a way to take the party itself out of the equation. New Labour's drive to centralize the party and ensure that it speaks with one voice at every level—on the ground, as well as in the various representative assemblies—may be intended not to strengthen the party but to marginalize it. The purpose may not be to place party at the heart of a complex web of political control (a strategy clearly central to the old democratic-collectivist tradition) but rather to evade party—and hence partisanship—altogether. And this would certainly prove compatible with New Labour's drive to reform the traditional majoritarian constitution.

Focus groups as the people's will

Two distinct features characterize the current Labour leadership's approach: one programmatic, the other electoral. The first is the now widely touted Third Way, an approach to policy making its proponents represent as an advance beyond the traditional alternatives of left and right. Quite deliberately, this is not billed as a partisan approach, but as the only possible programme for contemporary government, both necessary and unchallengeable. The Third Way is not only depicted as open to all; there is really no other choice on offer. As Marquand notes, 'Moral and ideological arguments for the Third Way are unnecessary; it does not have to be defended against alternative visions of the future, based on different moral and ideological premisses. There is only one future, and resistance to it is spitting in the wind.' The second of these features involves reliance on the plebiscitarian techniques which have already been adopted within the Labour Party itself, and which are now being

extended more generally.[7] Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was preceded by referendums, as was the introduction of direct mayoral elections in London. The new regional assemblies in England, should they come to pass, will also be sanctioned by referendum, as will any change in the Westminster voting system or the decision to join the single European currency. Perhaps even more crucially, at micro level key New Labour policy decisions are now framed and effectively sanctioned through focus groups.

What is important about this latter development is that it seeks to establish a more or less direct linkage between citizens and government. Traditionally in Britain, in keeping with the central tenets of majoritarian democracy, the linkage between citizens and their government was mediated—first by party and then by parliament—rather than direct. Parties put forward alternative programmes to the voters, with the winning party then claiming a popular mandate for its policies, implemented in government through the approval of a parliament which enjoyed an unchallenged sway within the constitutional order. British democracy was party democracy, and party democracy gained its purchase through parliamentary sovereignty. With a mandate from its own voters, the party proposed, and parliament disposed. This was how majoritarian democracy worked and how it was legitimated.

What has changed is that it is 'the people' who are now to dispose, with both party and parliament being increasingly neutralized. For New Labour, party appears to serve no other purpose than to be the voice of the people writ large. It no longer enjoys its own autonomous agenda. Partisanship in this sense is a thing of the past—both electorally and ideologically. As Tony Blair concluded his address to the 1999 Labour Conference, 'To every nation a purpose. To every Party a cause. And now, at last, Party and nation joined in the same cause for the same purpose: to set our people free.'[8] The relationship of this sense of democracy to the ideology of the Third Way is clear. Just as New Labour sees its

[7] This aspect of the New Labour approach has been emphasized particularly by Lord Irvine, the Cabinet member in charge of the constitutional reform agenda: see, for example, 'Britain's Programme of Constutional Change', lecture delivered by Lord Irvine to the Law Faculty, Leiden University, 22 October 1999.

[8] The complete speech was included on the *Guardian* website, 30 September 1999: http://www.newsunlimited.co.uk/lab99

programme as the only alternative, and hence without partisan purpose, so too the style of government is deliberately advertised as non-partisan. This is not intended as party democracy. It is government for, and indeed of, the people, rather than of any particular section of that people.[9] In this crucial sense it could be said to anticipate the establishment of a depoliticized and partyless democracy, which itself is perfectly compatible with power-sharing across the traditional party divides, the nomination to key positions of those outside the immediate party faithful, and the creation of institutions and electoral rules which appear to offer no immediate partisan advantage.

Assault on partisan politics

One crucial impetus behind this new strategy was Labour's experience of eighteen years of opposition to a powerful partisan government elected with only a minority of the popular vote. The 'factional mischief' wrought by the Conservatives under Thatcher and Major, and the incapacity of the opposition to impose any constraints on their mode of governing, served to convince Blair and his immediate supporters of the undesirability of strong party government of whatever hue. Institutional pluralism is therefore designed to prevent not only any future repitition of Conservative hegemony but also partisan rule as such. Instead, in a spirit Madison would probably have applauded (and recently echoed by a powerful restatement of the benefits of republican democracy),[10] the goal is 'good governance'—defined here as a partisan-free democracy.

This new strategy necessarily requires a sharp break with Labour's legacies, in particular the tradition of party voice. New Labour may be seeking to establish the basis for a partyless democracy, but it achieved power as a party in the traditional sense—mobilizing an organization on the ground, and a network of relationships within the labour movement, in clear-cut opposition to the Conservatives. Although its leadership may aspire to a more neutral and depoliticized version of consensus democ-

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[9] In Irvine's terms (fn. 7), 'We have set out to be an inclusive Government—a Government truly of the people, for the people, by the people. We have set out to be a Government which returns power to the people from whom power ultimately derives.'

[10] See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford 1997.

racy, it won office within majoritarian terms of reference, and hence inevitably faces pressure from its own ranks to behave in more partisan fashion. To evade that pressure, and to undo the constraints it imposes, New Labour would like to take party out of the equation. In centralizing control, eliminating dissent and ensuring deference to the leadership by those in public office, New Labour is not aiming to strengthen the party but to sideline it. Seen in this light, the apparent tension between institutional pluralism and party discipline disappears. Both derive from an attempt to remove the politics of party from the governing process. On one side, decision-making is dispersed and power shared; on the other, the party is gagged, and policies are judged by the standards of good governance rather than partisan purpose. All of this is in keeping with the philosophy of the unchallengeable Third Way and setting 'the people' free. The point is to take 'politics' out of government. In the surrounds of contemporary Westminster there is now less and less regard for what Peter Mandelson has dismissively referred to as the 'tendentious grandstanding that more adversarial politics brings to debates in this place.'[11]

It is perhaps symptomatic of an increasingly general contempt for party politics that even the outright dismissal of politics as such attracts little comment. 'I was never really in politics,' claimed Blair, interviewed recently by the BBC. 'I never grew up as a politician. I don't feel myself a politician even now. I don't think of myself as a politician in the sense of being someone whose whole driving force in life is politics.'[12] A similar anti-political, or at least anti-party political approach permeates the recent report on the reform of the House of Lords, in which the preference for appointed as opposed to popularly elected members is justified on the basis that 'the new second chamber should not simply be a creature of the political parties, and the influence of the parties on individual members should be minimised.'[13] For politics, read party politics; and

[11] Quoted in Barnett, 'Parliament in Flux'.

[12] *Blair's Thousand Days,* BBC2, 30 January 2000.

[13] *A House for the Future. Report of the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords,* London, January 2000, p. 3. Tellingly, the argument goes on: 'We wanted to create a new second chamber which was politically astute but not a home for yet another group of professional politicians; which provided an appropriate role for the political parties but discouraged sterile partisan confrontation; and which included members of the political parties but was designed to limit the parties' influence and foster the exercise of independent judgement.'

for party politics, read bad politics. The democracy of the new century should be depoliticized democracy. For that, what will be needed is the 'ability to exercise an unfettered judgement, relatively free from partisan control', as the Wakeham report put it in the context of a new second chamber.

Two groups stand in the way of this new style of democracy. The first are the traditional 'forces of conservatism' Blair railed against in his 1999 Conference address: 'Arrayed against us: the forces of conservatism, the cynics, the elites, the establishment . . . On our side, the forces of modernity and justice. Those who believe in a Britain for all the people.' Here, New Labour strategy is clear: confine the more extreme elements of this opposition to an increasingly beleaguered and electorally marginal Conservative party in the Commons, and incorporate the moderate elements within the constitutional reform agenda (Patten, Wakeham) or the drive towards further Europeanization (Clark, Heseltine).

The second group to obstruct the New Labour project is the left, inside and outside Labour's ranks. Here its strategy is no less plain: deny these forces voice or influence. Hence its initial resort to plebiscitary techniques within the party, aimed at overwhelming the militant activists with the numerical weight of the more deferential rank and file; and when these became decreasingly successful, its subsequent manipulation of internal procedures to ensure that only those on message would reach key positions inside the party or on lists of candidates for public office. From the leadership's point of view its own favoured candidates do not express a partisan position at odds with that of the left; rather, the left is partisan, its own positions are not. Of course, this is an old story in political life. When political leaders attack partisanship, it is inevitably someone else's. Rounding on Ken Livingstone's candidature for the London mayoral elections as a return to the divisive politics of the 1980s, Blair did so not in the name of a more modern partisan politics that would replace what had gone before: his argument was rather that the partisan—read, 'left'—politics of the past was being pushed aside by a non-partisan—read, New Labour—politics of the future. In much the same way that Marquand interprets the ideology of the Third Way as requiring no defence against alternative visions, so, too, the new style of governance affects invincibility: the only alternatives—those of past partisanship—are no longer relevant.

It is still unclear whether this attempt to transform the governing culture in Britain can be carried through to its intended conclusion. Although Labour's parliamentary majority is currently secure, its electoral plurality is not. With just over 43 per cent of the vote in 1997, Labour actually won a smaller share of support than at any election in the 1950s or 1960s, and this in an election characterized by a record low turnout. Continued electoral vulnerability will almost certainly encourage elements within the party to fall back on a more adversarial style of politics which will immediately undermine the drive towards partyless democracy. There are also obvious limits to the leadership's capacity to control internal dissent: whether for reasons of ideology, contrariness, or simply because they wish to follow the ostensible logic of institutional pluralism, substantial numbers of Labour Party members in the emerging units of the decentralized British state seem set on establishing their own priorities and on rejecting direction from above.[14] And while the New Labour leadership might happily see some of these dissenting elements exiting the party and forming their own radical left alternative (which could then be marginalized), the continuation of a majoritarian electoral system at national level makes this option highly unlikely. That said, the prospect of a potential left exit from Labour is probably a strong incentive for the leadership to reform the Westminster electoral system. To isolate the Conservatives on the right and its own radical critics in a separate party on the left could afford New Labour the space to cement an enduring and broadly based majority coalition with the Liberal Democrats in the centre.

Goo-goos

At the moment the Labour leadership is hedging its bets. The first steps towards institutional pluralism are now irrevocable, but the second stage—the creation of genuine bicameralism, a reform of the voting system for Westminster, the forging of an even closer coalition with the Liberal Democrats—is already faltering. Taken to the extreme, it is perfectly conceivable to imagine a wholly 'consensualized' British democracy, with the regions as well as the central government itself all run by virtually unshiftable centrist coalitions of New Labourists and Liberal Democrats, swatting off ineffective challenges from a rump

[14] This theme is explored at length in Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland*, London 2000.

right, on one side, and a minority left, on the other. Indeed, Tony Blair might prefer to govern on the basis of a cross-party coalition with the Liberals than in an internal party coalition with his own left. This could be the end game: consolidation of an ongoing coalition of 'goo-goos'—practitioners of good governance—periodically endorsed by 'the people' and its plebiscites. But it remains to be seen whether this future will be stymied by those legacies which New Labour would now prefer to forget.

A striking feature of New Labour's aspirations is the extent to which they appear to have a broader wind in their sails. Throughout the established western democracies, and pervading much new writing on democratic theory, can be observed an increasing assumption that the age of partisan politics has passed. Parties themselves, once regarded as the guarantors of democracy, are coming to be seen as passé. It is no coincidence that the preferred nomenclature is now 'New Labour' rather than the 'Labour Party'. Here as elsewhere there are echoes of the United States, where Clinton's famous strategy of 'triangulation' in 1996 was presented as a transcendence of the shabby interests of partisan politics in favour of a government of 'the people'. There has been a similar trend in Italy, where not one of the major 'parties' currently seeking to reconstitute the political system, from the *Democratici di Sinistra* on the left to *Forza Italia* on the right, now calls itself a party: the term has become a dirty word. Indeed, on the fringes of the political spectrum, and particularly among the new extreme right movements which have recently gained so much headway in countries such as Austria, Belgium and France, appeals are increasingly couched within a populist anti-party rhetoric.

Depoliticized democracy

On a more elevated plane, visions of the future emerging from the more disengaged confines of the academy tend to share an increasing disregard for party and partisanship, coded as proposals for a 'republican democracy', 'associative democracy', 'deliberative democracy', 'regulatory democracy', or whatever. Probably none of these theorists would endorse the more fanciful notions of the end of history current at the beginning of the 1990s, but all seem to assume the inevitability—and often also the desirability—of the end of politics, at least as this has come to be practised in most postwar democracies. In a sense far removed from that once mooted by Marx, politics is increasingly seen by many

theorists, as well as current practitioners, to be a matter of administration—or, in more contemporary parlance, good governance. There is an increasing tendency to believe that objective solutions to social, economic or cultural problems are most likely to be found after you have established a judicious mix of institutional correctness and expert, non-partisan judgements. Partisanship becomes redundant, democracy depoliticized. This is the ultimate logic of the Third Way approach to governing. Nevertheless, though anti-partisan, it would be mistaken to see this vision as simply anti-democratic. Nor, despite the eschewal of the role of party as mediating agency, should it be regarded as a rebranding of old-style populist democracy, or as what Anthony Barnett has defined as 'corporate populism'.[15] Elements of populism certainly exist within the New Labour approach, and in some cases, as with Blair's 1999 Conference address, these have been blazoned without inhibition. Populism is also, of course, associated with demands for more direct or plebiscitarian forms of democracy—the people as master—that New Labour has made a central plank. Populism in its pure form, however, is completely antithetical to the constitutionalist elements of modern republican thinking,[16] and it is these, above all, that inform the Blair project. This is not a mere reworking of older and more conventional traditions, but a novel combination of constitutionalism and plebiscitarianism. The voice of the people is clearly important but, contrary to the assumptions of partisan democracy, it does not set the political agenda in advance. Rather the people, via elections and plebiscites, serve as the ultimate check on their governors, endorsing or rejecting policies and programmes designed by the inner circles of relatively autonomous political institutions. Voters may not be invited to play a major role in formulating policy—that is a matter for their rulers—but they remain, if only retrospectively, the final arbiters. This is why sanctions are invited for election pledges that go unmet; and why New Labour's promises to voters take the form of a contract.

Unfamiliar as this configuration may be, it could yet become widespread within contemporary democracies. It is intriguing that a similar sense of how modern democracy can be made to work more effectively seems to

[15] In *Prospect*, February 1999. See also Nairn, *After Britain*, pp. 76–80, where corporate populism is understood to involve 'neither ancient subjecthood nor modern constitutional citizenship' but rather a notion of the voter as 'consumer'.
[16] On this, see *Republicanism*, pp. 7–11.

underlie recent arguments by the astute German political scientist Fritz Scharpf. Discussing potential legitimacy problems facing the European Union, he dwells on the limits of 'input-oriented democracy—*government by the people*,' and suggests that 'even in constitutional democracies at the national level, input-oriented arguments could never carry the full burden of legitimizing the exercise of governing power. They are everywhere supplemented, and in many policy areas . . . displaced, by output-oriented arguments showing how specific institutional arrangements are conducive to *government for the people*—meaning that they will favour policy choices that can be justified in terms of consensual notions of the public interest.'[17]

New Labour is currently engaged in what amounts to a full-blooded constitutional revolution, dragging the political system away from an extreme version of majoritarian democracy towards a more institutionally consensual model. But whereas the consensus democracies that developed on the European mainland grew from a foundation in party politics (with party both as representative and, collaboratively, as governor), the version underway in Britain seeks to break new ground by ruling party out of the equation. This is what is really novel about the New Labour project—a drive to pursue 'the public interest' untramelled by the mischiefs of faction, offering 'the people' the sanction of judging in the last instance how that interest has been served. In its deep-rooted distrust of partisanship, this is a vision which increasingly suits the tenor of the times. Although not actually hostile to democracy, it appears to reflect a growing indifference towards it. When politics is contested by parties, it inevitably involves a conflict of alternatives between which voters are expected to choose. It requires public debate. When partisanship is removed from the equation, however, and constitutionalism is married to plebiscitarianism, such alternatives as emerge are presented, discussed and decided exclusively within the institutions, and the popular voice is only to approve or disapprove the agreements that have there been reached. Despite its populist façade, plebiscitarian democracy is flawed democracy. To offer citizens the choice of saying yes or no is not the same as offering the choice of real alternatives, and engaging them in a public competition of ideas. The model of good governance

[17] Fritz Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?*, Oxford 1999, p. 188.

places the power of decision in the hands of the 'good governors' themselves. Party democracy, despite the disregard in which it is presently held, asked more of the citizen.