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Powered by Politics: Reforming Parties from the Inside

BY LIAM BYRNE MP

ELECTORAL turnout in 1997 was lower than in any of the previous 14 elections and after the 2001 general election, when turnout fell still further, there was—rightly—much fretting and then analysis of why turnout was so low. The politics of Britain is changing, and political parties need to change with it. In new conditions, strategies change, and with changes in strategy must come changes in structure. This article is one contribution to the debate about what now needs to be done.

What's changing?

The politics of Britain is changing as three—at the very least three—great forces unfold: the long term dealignment of voter loyalties; a step change in the expectations of local electorates in their demands of public services; and an increasingly difficult media environment through which to communicate. The dealignment of traditional political loyalties and the growth of 'post-materialist' values have been widely discussed. Much of the change is the result of the seismic alterations in Britain's economy. First highlighted by political analysts after the war, economic changes have continued year on year since the early 1980s. Business and services sectors have continued to balloon, expanding by 60% (two million jobs) since 1981 to become the second largest sector of employment. Manufacturing—once Labour's heartland—has continued to lose jobs—falling to 16% of the labour market in 1999, from 25% in 1981.[1]

In all sectors, change is the leitmotiv as the job for life has become a thing of the past: only one third of British employees have been with their employers for 10 years (compared to 25% in the US); 24% work part-time and 11% are self-employed. The nature of people's jobs has changed too. In 1971, manual occupations accounted for half of employment—by 1999 it was under 40%. Managerial, professional and 'associate professional' expanded to account for 37% of the workforce in 1999—up 10% on 1971. With rising material wealth has come post-materialism. Average households today are far wealthier than in the past: over 90% wealthier in real terms than in 1972. In 1999, real disposable income per household was 66% higher than in 1988, and expenditure on toys and sports goods over the last 10 years has

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increased 169%, leisure goods by 81%, air fares by 53% and overseas travel by 35%.[2]

Modernist values of wealth accumulation, respect for traditional authority, emphasis on the family and allegiance to the institutions of government, big businesses, trade unions and religious bodies, have been challenged by the rise in post-modernist values, prioritising the quality of life over wealth and a belief in personal value systems over adherence to the ideologies of religion or state. For many, the individual has come to replace the group as the key feature in value systems and politics must in turn tailor itself to appeal to the elector as an individual rather than as a member of a group.

At the same time, the locus of political consciousness has altered because party politics has been challenged by globalization, with power being dispersed both nationally and internationally. There are international organisations such as the European Union, the World Bank and the IMF. There are large multinationals, the hundred largest of which, Noreena Hertz[3] estimates, account for 20% of global foreign assets, whilst 51 of the hundred biggest economies in the world are now corporations. As Philip Gould puts it in 'New Electorate, New Strategy':[4]

> These are the profound forces that are remaking the world of politics. The scale and scope of this transformation is immense. Power no longer constrained within nation states seems distant and unaccountable. This at a time when people want more control over their lives, not less. It is this tension that is leading to such turbulent political times: a world that is harder to control, just as people are asserting the right to more and more control.

In political terms, this challenge for political parties is exacerbated by what Robert Putnam termed the decline in social capital. As he noted when he came to the UK to promote his book some three years ago, the decline in social capital here and in Europe more generally is harder to elicit, but the same factors which have degraded the precious commodity in the US are at work in the UK: the rise of two-career families leaving homes empty during the day; suburban sprawl which enlarges the 'triangle' between where we live, where we work (and indeed for how long; our work hours too have grown longer—21% of workers worked over 41 hours per week, compared to 14% in 1984) and where we shop; commercial television and generational change.

This generational change is undoubtedly significant. Examining the turnout amongst younger cohorts, Edward Phelps concluded that 'the level of decline is unprecedented when compared to other cohorts' and that this fall may be simply due to the younger generation being 'unable to comprehend a system designed to solve the problems of a different era.' The net effect for politicians is that political identity is in decline. Currently less than 50% of the population says that they identify with a political party. This is especially pronounced amongst younger voters. Overall, Phelps argues, only 44% of the under 30s regard themselves as

supporters of political parties (compared to 61% of the over 50s). Just 41% of the under 30s believe 'my vote really counts' (compared to 62% of the over 50s). In other words: 'most under 30s feel detached from the world of parties and governments. They do not feel any tribal loyalty towards any party nor do they feel that the act of voting makes much difference'.[5]

The second great force—less debated—is the step-change in the ordinary expectations of the British electorate. This new view of the world induces a shortening in the patience—and a frustration with the obstacles that often get in the way of making anything happen in local communities. Driven by exponentially rising standards of care in the service economy, including new definitions of the time taken to deliver service, pressured by new challenges to personal time, and newly empowered with rich seams of accessible information, citizens are far less prepared to put up with service that they do no feel is adequate.

Crucial parts of the electorate have changed, and in the future they will change further. In 2020, for example, many over-60s will be better off, better educated—and with higher expectations of public services than retirees before them. They will possess 'increased wealth and income and will have been accustomed to and will expect higher quality services' particularly as the over-60s of 2020 will be the first cohort to have lived with the NHS all of their lives.[6] Changes in the way people live their lives have created and will continue to create a different set of demands for public services—and this will change voters' views of politicians and their perceptions of whether or not they have 'delivered'.

Already the population is more demanding than in the past. Byrne *et al* noted that people are 50% more likely to complain about bad service than five years ago. In 2000, 42% of people said they are more likely to complain about poor service or faulty goods on the phone—up from 27% in 1997. Complaints to the General Medical Council have risen from 19 per week in 1995 to 86 per week in 2000. Consumers of public services are also much better informed—there are, for example, now 46 UK health consumer magazines compared to 13 in 1992, and there are over 200 patient groups with regular websites. James Crabtree recently noted:

> A survey from the PEW Internet Research Institute ... found that 55% of those who use the internet to check for health information (22 million Americans) consulted the internet before visiting their doctors. 79% did the same after their visit. The next generation of public service users—those from Generation Y, born between 1979 and 1994—will consult Google first, their GP second.[7]

Underpinning this shift are big changes in the way we live. Women are under more pressure as they play a greater role in the labour market, often in parallel to running a home. Hours have risen for a significant minority, producing a customer group 'of better educated, harder working individuals wanting more choice, convenience and tailoring to

their individual needs'. Already 66% of people now agree with the statement 'I never have enough time to get things done', up by 20% on ten years ago, and up to 15% of full-time workers choose not to leave their desks for lunch at all.[8] Expectations of quality public services are rising, as public service users expect higher standards—and become less afraid to express dissatisfaction. In five years time, Britain's households are forecast to spend the majority of household income on services for the first time—and as exposure to the service economy grows, voters are likely to expect more from government.

This is, of course, a challenge that affects many organisations beyond politics. Zuboff and Maxmin's *The Support Economy* suggests a total collapse in customer confidence, with even business attempts to satisfy customers unraveling. 'At the start of the twenty first century,' they argue, 'people have new dreams...expressed in a psychological awareness of one's own complex individuality...As a result of these new dreams a chasm has opened up between people and the organisations on which they depend'. As Crabtree puts it, 'No amount of business process re-engineering, total quality management or mass customisation, it seems, can stem customer disappointment'. Finally, against the backdrop of these great forces, politicians face a completely altered media environment through which to talk to voters. As Philip Gould put it:

> The final force is the growth of global communications. The scale and pace of media coverage does not just report events, it shapes events. The world's economies are affected by the way that the media covers the emerging scandals of corporate America and Europe, and subsequent stock market uncertainty. And global media has collapsed distance and time. All news, like all politics, is now simultaneously local and global.

These three trends together—dealignment and weakening of traditional loyalties, the step change in expectations and the thicker fog of the media environment—point to new demands for today's political party.

What changes mean for political parties

When I was at business school, I had a professor of business history who at the end of the course was asked to sum up, from a study of 200 years of American business, why once great companies declined. He paused for thought before answering; 'There are two reasons that, historically, companies decline. Either they leave their market. Or their market leaves them.' As with companies, so with parties, and the market requirement for political parties has not gone; it has just changed. This is, above all, the real conclusion from several studies charting the recent decline in election turnouts. As Paul Whiteley recently noted, it 'is not so much that participation has declined, but rather that it has evolved over time and taken on new forms.'[9]

Martin Luther King once took as the subject for his sermon, something he called the 'drum major instinct'. 'There is deep down within all

of us, an instinct', he said. 'It's a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be out in front . . . (and) the presence of the drum major instinct is why so many of us are joiners.'[10] On closer inspection, the drum major instinct may be alive and well in Britain. Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, in analysing the UK electorate, explored seventeen different types of political action and concluded that 'A sense of civic obligation runs deep amongst the British'. On average, they found, people had engaged in at least three of the seventeen political activities listed in the last year. Voters were most likely to have given money (62%), voted (50%) or signed a petition (42%); 28% had participated in a boycott; just 5% had attended a political meeting or rally, but 13% had contacted a politician.[11]

Furthermore, four out of ten people are members of at least one type of group. 19% belong to just one group; 20% belong to two, three or four groups. This means something important, as the authors noted: '18 million adults in Great Britain belong to, 11 million participants participate in, and four million volunteered their time and labour for organisations.' What is more, around 1 million adults (2% of the adult population) are 'super-activists' belonging to five or more groups.[12]

Interest in politics, therefore, has not really diminished. Increasing numbers of people claim they identify with single issue groups. Whilst traditional institutions become increasingly remote and seemingly irrelevant to modern life a different kind of engagement has emerged as illustrated by movements such as the fuel protest, the Countryside Alliance and the anti-war campaign. Non-governmental organisations, consumer associations and think tanks have also been growing in number. The National Trust, with a membership of over one million members, has three times the membership of the Conservative Party. Nor have people given up on the notion that organised, concerted action is required to change the world for the better. 81% of the adult population gave to the tsunami appeal. British giving per head was twice the American rate and two-three times that of many European nations. Three million young people volunteer each year, 41% in formal volunteering and 67% in some sort of informal volunteering, while 59% of young people aged 15–24 want to know about how to get more involved in their communities. Overall, 22 million adults are involved in volunteering each year and 90 million hours of formal voluntary work takes place each week, with an economic value of some £400 million a year.

Britain's social capital—in which organised political activity is rooted—has not evaporated altogether. 71% of respondents to a 2004 Home Office[13] survey believe they belonged to a neighbourhood. 65% agreed that people in their neighbourhood pulled together to improve it. Incidentally, according to Peter Kellner, the fraction of the electorate believing that government should spend more to get rid of poverty has also risen—to 89% in 2000, up from 80% in 1983.[14]

The problem, then, is not that the British electorate has resigned into a world of apathy but that too few people who want to change their communities and their country view political parties as the best vehicles by which to do so. They are rejecting the 'products' laid out by today's political parties. Just 35% of the public are satisfied with British democracy. Betty Boothroyd, a former Speaker of the House, put the challenge well in her farewell address to the Commons: 'The level of cynicism about Parliament and the accompanying alienation of many of the young from the democratic process is troubling. It is an issue on which every member of the house should wish to reflect.'[15]

Five points for change

The requirement for hard power—the power it takes to organise and win elections—is increasingly matched by the need to project 'soft power'. For progressives, this manner of reorganisation is not just required to win elections, it is vital to consolidating a progressive consensus in the country. In his recent Smith Institute pamphlet, Douglas Alexander put it succinctly:

> [We must] build a progressive consensus among the British people—not just for progressive politics but for a 'common sense' in which the values of equality, solidarity and social justice prevail. There is a growing recognition that electoral success is a necessary but not sufficient condition of achieving (such) change.

But what does that mean in practice? Peter Kellner recently concluded his own analysis of the 2001 election with a few pointers of his own, above all that parties need to foster a genuine two way dialogue and that 'politicians must heed the lesson that all politics is local'.[16]

In part, local action helps political parties overcome one of the more frustrating features of today's political world; the failure of people to connect their own positive experiences of change with the general state of the nation. There is almost a sense that they live in their own benign biosphere. Labour has, to a degree, become the victim of its own success. With major spheres of the economy well under control, local issues in many places have risen to the top of the issue agenda, recording far higher salience levels than anything else, whether it is the quality of local policing or the state of the local environment. Kellner might have also added that the local media environment is perhaps the last corner of decent reporting standards in print journalism and far easier today for politicians to communicate through than, say, the *Daily Mail*.

Labour has already grasped much of this. Its 2005 election campaign was far more localised in character than the set-piece battles of the past. Election addresses, for example, while incorporating national themes, were more customized to each community, with local pledges and not just national goals. The Labour Party is actually very good at change. Soon after Tony Blair's election, the party became the first to import

into the UK the flexible, campaign control systems pioneered in the Clinton 1992 War Room. Once elected, Labour changed again, using Partnership in Power to change the way government and party talked about politics to a method which involved far more people in an intelligent dialogue about policy than ever before. The challenge now for Labour is to renew the party again, and to recreate it as *the* first port of call for people who want to affect the direction of their communities and beyond that the world in general. That means nothing less than reorganising structures, networks, training and the pattern of activities to support those action-orientated people who are unhappy at injustice in Britain today and are prepared to do something about it. So, here are five points for action.

1. STRENGTHEN RECRUITMENT TO LOCAL SPENDING BODIES. What some members of the Labour Party have forgotten is that our frontline is still governed locally by health authorities, primary care trusts, NHS hospital trusts, schools, colleges, universities, learning and skills councils (LSCs), regional development agencies, councils, police authorities, magistrates courts, housing associations and arts councils. Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) are excellent local party parliaments, brilliant at connecting activists to the business of winning council seats and to parliamentary representatives and our vital sister organisations. But they are utterly useless at educating individual members who joined because they wanted to change things, or connecting them to the burgeoning opportunities to serve and lead the 36,285 institutions that spend £25 million every hour of the working day on the issues that Labour was elected to sort out. Some 401,445 councillors, governors, board members, quangocrats and Justices of the Peace look after around £154 billion (£383,614 each), try 95% of crimes and appoint thousands of our frontline public servants (and this excludes new government initiatives like the New Deal for Communities Partnerships and health action zones).

Yet how many CLPs educate new members about how to become a school governor, never mind anything more esoteric, like how to win a place on a regional development agency (whose board members each account for, on average, £14,285,000), or become a primary care trust board member, or a lay representative on a police authority? Too many CLPs are prepared to attack ministers and councillors on health, education and crime, yet do nothing themselves to affect the frontline. Indeed, how many CLPs make sure that Labour school and college governors, LSC board members and members of university courts come together on a regular basis to talk about transforming post-16 education participation rates, or the fact that in London 25% of people have a degree, yet in the North East only one in ten enjoy the same privilege? Very few.

Some, of course, will say that the boards of our local public sector must not, under any circumstances, become tainted with accusations of

politicisation. This argument ignores at least two facts. The first is that local spending bodies all operate a due process for appointing members. They do not simply take anyone, despite appearances in some parts of the country. And second, board members—whether Labour or not—have an overriding obligation to serve and advise in the best interest of the institution they govern. They should not put party advantage first. Party members who are governors or board members cannot and do not leave professionalism at the door of a meeting.

2. CREATE AND MANAGE NEW REGIONAL ISSUE-BASED NETWORKS. To really deliver strong local campaigns requires a change in emphasis in the role of the local MP. Once upon a time, the MP's job was—casework aside—almost exclusively in Westminster. Today, MPs have to help create epicentres for change in their local communities. If Labour nationally must become the party of the radical centre, then local MPs have to become the centre of radicalism in their local communities. MPs as local leaders are important because they are often best placed at translating what Marshall Ganz at the Kennedy School of Government calls 'disorganised communities' into something better.[17] 'Disorganised communities' are divided and confused. Each has a different story to tell. There is lots of gossip but not much information. They are largely passive and reactive, and they drift—from one meeting to the next. Organised communities are very different. They are united and share an understanding of what is going on, what the challenge is and why what is being done is being done. People participate and they take the initiative. Above all there is a sense of purpose.

The translation between the two states comes down to good local leaders. As Ganz puts it, 'Organisers exercise leadership by bringing people together to determine their common interests and act upon them.' They bring people together and they develop relationships between them. They facilitate a common understanding of a problem, they develop strategies and they motivate people. Above all, they accept responsibility to get something done.

At the heart of this is building relationships—more than exchanges because they involve a degree of commitment to a shared future. New relationships reveal new common interests and new resources—which together can become social capital, a source of power that did not exist before. MPs cannot act alone. To strengthen local campaigning, the party needs to extend the sort of infrastructure developed for Partnership in Power beyond deliberation and into support for action by, for example, providing training in best practice, documenting sources of funding, and providing ample opportunity for people interested in particular issues to come together, deliberate and learn from each other and from the people responsible for areas of policy nationally. Where today are the structures for ensuring that Labour secretaries of state have the opportunity to tell local governors about their analysis of

education issues? How do Home Office ministers' share their lessons learned with a network of members trying to organize action against anti-social behaviour? Voluntary organizations are strong not just for their innovation and capacity, but also because of their autonomy Political parties may be required to develop 'associate networks', focused on action rather than policy.

3. DON'T GET SIDE-TRACKED BY ABOLISHING TRADITIONAL STRUCTURES. If anything, the development of new modes of association and organization raises the premium on retaining traditional structures as the foundation on which everything else is built. This is not simply an argument to ensure that the many in the party who retain affection for General Committees and branch affiliations are bought into change—although it will help. Ultimately, political parties have to get local leaders elected—to council positions and Parliament—if they are to have a future at all. Traditional structures remain efficient at the business of selecting and electing local leaders. The trick is not to make a fetish of them, or let them monopolise the political airtime of local activists, which they only tend to do in the first place for lack of any organized alternative activities.

4. TRANSFORM THE LOCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIONS AND LOCAL PARTIES. Fourth, the party has to retain—but strengthen—the nature of local party links to trade unions. Trade unions are not just the cradle of the Labour Party and a link to the reality of the workplace; they are potentially a great source of civic strength. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley's survey of political activity found that some 9% of respondents were members of trade unions—the second highest level of organisational membership behind membership of motoring organizations (29%).[18] But, today, the relationship between party and trade unions is concentrated at the national or regional level. Local links need revivifying.

5. DON'T STOP DOING WHAT WORKED WELL IN THE PAST. Finally, it would be a fatal error in the current political and media environment to stop—or allow to erode—the strong centre which Labour first put in place before the 1997 campaign. One of my first jobs in Westminster was helping fine-tune Labour's HQ for the 1997 election. The list of capabilities developed then remains, in my view, a (dated) guide to what is needed now: clear decision-making structures; the ability to project and sustain a coherent message across a multiplicity of communications channels, where necessary driving the news; the capability to translate orders into action effectively; pro-active exploration and highlighting of opposition weaknesses while responding very quickly to challenges the opposition might table; close observance of the needs and ambitions of targeted groups of voters and the ability to optimize the use of outside resources. The centre is critical. A new emphasis on local campaigns cannot detract from investing in a strong national centre of gravity.

Back to the future?

Throughout Labour's history, the communities which it has sought to serve have reached a point when they strived to combine and cooperate in order to tackle the difficulties they confronted in their lives. It is almost programmed into the party DNA. In the 1760s, cooperative cornmills were built by dockworkers in response to monopolistic local millowners. These were the early industrial progenitors of Rochdale Pioneers, a group of artisans who founded the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1844. They reacted to tough economic conditions in Rochdale by combining a variety of principles—such as democratic control, open membership and distribution of surplus in proportion to an individual's contribution—into an alternative system of production and distribution.

These examples of self-help have inspired generation after generation of Labour's leaders. It was Kier Hardy who once proclaimed: 'Socialism is not help from the outside in the form of state help—it is the people helping themselves acting through their own organizations, regulating their own affairs.'[19] A century later, Gordon Brown wrote in *Making Mass Membership Work* (1992):

> In the past, people interested in change have joined the Labour Party largely to elect agents of change. Today they want to be agents of change themselves. Tenants' associations, residents' groups, school governors, community groups. These are where Labour Party members will be in the 90s, bringing Labour values to life.

There is probably no better mission statement for refreshing the party infrastructure in preparation for a fourth term.

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