

# Parties, causes and political power

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Political parties are losing popular legitimacy, while campaigning groups are increasingly under fire: what does this mean for political power?

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**B**y the time the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill was published in summer 2013 it had become little more than a brutal attempt to shut down civil society influence on electoral politics. Any work in the public domain that could be seen to address matters of public policy would be covered by far stricter rules than previously; but corporate lobbying would be virtually untouched. And although there will be some adjustments to the Bill before it finally becomes law, it will undoubtedly retain its character as a strategic move by government to place a firewall around the establishment's monopoly on political authority. This attempt to constrain non-party campaigning groups also represents a tacit admission by politicians that much political legitimacy lies outside the party system.

While the political elite is attempting to shut down the culture of civic campaigning, the corporate world is attempting to co-opt it. Nestlé breakfast cereals now have their own manifestos, 'campaigning to let everybody know that kids loove Cheerios'; while Wetherspoons is spearheading a campaign 'to secure more equal tax treatment for food sold through pubs, restaurants and food service operators' by introducing a 'tax parity day' on which prices in pubs will be reduced by 7.5 per cent - in effect drawing on the aesthetics of popular campaigning to give credibility to a day-long happy hour. With 17 per cent of people claiming to be

## Soundings

part of an environmental group, and media-savvy activists increasingly skilled at garnering media attention, it is little surprise that 'cause culture' has now been firmly incorporated by commercial branding as part of their repertoire.

The Bill can be understood as a response by political parties to an existential threat. It does not simply reflect a worry about digital technologies having made it easier to rapidly aggregate opinion and co-ordinate action in the form of campaigns; it stems from an anxiety that the explosion of energy around cause-based politics is coinciding with a time when mainstream parties, by all the key indicators - voter turn-out, party membership and trust in politicians - are virtually dead. Voter turn-out declines at every election.<sup>1</sup> Those who do vote do so as much out of fear or disgust at one of the other parties, rather than as a genuine enthusiasm for putting an X on the ballot paper. Membership of political parties has collapsed over the past half-century from a peak of 3.8 million to around four hundred thousand.<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian* recently revealed that the average age of a Conservative Party member is now around 70 - on this evidence it is literally dying out, unable to renew itself generationally.<sup>3</sup> The Liberal Democrats have their own crisis, with membership crashing after they entered the coalition government. As for Labour, in the row over union affiliation the GMB has suggested that only 15 per cent of its members would identify as supporters of the party, and has slashed its funding accordingly. Working people can no longer be relied on to support the party formed to represent their interests. To many, political parties are a necessary evil only because there seems no alternative to the electoral process. Politicians are despised: according to Ipsos Mori only 18 per cent of people think they can be trusted.

This is zombie politics.<sup>4</sup> The flesh on the bones of our decision-making institutions is rotten. Parties are aware that they face a crisis and are trying to re-invent themselves - as in the Refounding Labour project or the new Renewal think tank for the Conservatives. But their most pressing need is to understand why and how they have become such unpopular vehicles for expressing popular engagement in the political process. Labour shows some awareness of the problem, but apart from in the leader's office and among a few other outliers, there seems little real appetite for going beyond the party's role as an electoral machine.

As the gagging bill indicates, some politicians within the Coalition have looked around for where political energy and activity is gathering outside of party politics; and spotting it in cause-based groups like 38 Degrees, UK Uncut or Citizens UK,

## Parties, causes and political power

rather than seeking to harness it, they cynically attempt to shut it down. Lacking the spark of life, they seek to snuff it out wherever they can find it.

Most commentators on the decline and seemingly imminent collapse of political parties point to their high-point in the 1950s, when nearly 10 per cent of the electorate were members of one of the two main parties, and compare this unfavourably with the present, when fewer than 1 per cent hold a party card. It seems unlikely that post-war era levels of participation in political parties can be repeated, but there is no lack of will to participate - the same survey that showed intention to turn out at a general election to be as low as 41 per cent (and only 12 per cent for those under 24 years old) also showed that 47 per cent of the sample want to be more involved in the running of their communities; and 42 per cent want to be active in national decision making. It seems that political parties are no longer seen as the main vehicle for civic participation and, as the Hansard society itself puts it, there are 'serious questions about the long-term future health and credibility of our system of representative democracy'.<sup>5</sup>

Political parties have become culturally dissonant. The common desire to build a better future and be active in collective life is instead finding expression in any number of political causes. While parties are in decline, cause-based organisations are flourishing in their place. The problem here is that, by structure and by will, these organisations - whether manifesting themselves as local community groups, direct action campaigns organised through social media or internationally established NGOs with considerable lobbying power - are unable to act decisively in the role that parties once filled. Unlike political parties, they have never sought state power themselves, but are designed to influence it and hold it to account. Moreover, although they have popular legitimacy, they are always in danger of being co-opted, both structurally into the formal processes of lobbying and governance, and aesthetically, in terms of consumer branding.

### **The golden age of party politics?**

The brio of party politics immediately after World War Two perhaps owed something to the positive perception of the era's political leaders. Churchill's wartime leadership had made him a nationally respected figure, and Attlee's reforming Labour government had lived up to the expectations generated during the war of

## Soundings

creating a better peace. Yet the membership figures cannot simply be attributed to a better calibre of leader or the higher moral standing of politicians. In the immediate post-war period there was a significant difference in the role of political parties, particularly in their location in everyday life - and this is worth exploring further.

Gidon Cohen and Lewis Mates write that, in the 1940s and 1950s, concerted efforts by a constituency party 'could recruit hundreds of members and dozens of new activists in a single day'. They explain this ease of recruitment as resulting from both organisational imperatives on the membership and a public who were receptive to such approaches.<sup>6</sup> Looking at local Newcastle Conservatives, Cohen and Mates suggest that one of the drivers of membership seemed to be the thrill of the cut and thrust of debate within the party. Far from being the slick electoral machines of the contemporary era, local parties would engage in intense struggles over selection of candidates and use of party resources. And people would join for entertainment as much as conviction. Parties were part of a cultural bricolage of strong institutions - church, factory, union and so forth - that helped provide identity and give people a sense of place in the world.

But swelling party memberships, of course, also owed much to clearer ideological divisions; there seemed to exist a much more straightforward choice between left and right, the 'political' working class against the settled order. Furthermore, mass Tory Party membership has historically tended to occur in reaction to the level of threat perceived by an active labour movement.<sup>7</sup> As Andrew Thorpe has argued, the record levels of Conservative Party membership in the 1950s were a direct result of Labour's success: 'Faced with the reality of a "socialist" government, many lapsed members returned and new ones came in for the first time'.<sup>8</sup>

This was the era of mass culture: the wireless, one or two TV channels and a top 40 singles chart that was a fairly reliable measure of what people were listening to. Fashion was conformist and the population was almost exclusively white. Disruption to this mono-culture was often experienced as a shock. But this was also an era during which Britain began to modernise and became more diverse, in culture, society and economy - there was the start of mass commonwealth migration to Britain, the flourishing of the public sector and new industries, the Americanisation of popular culture and a decline in the old deference. And perhaps the biggest change in the post-war era was the emergence of an organised working-class culture that could articulate its claims on the privileges of the old class hierarchies with

## Parties, causes and political power

confidence and vigour.

As a reaction against this emerging new hegemony, Conservatism during this time developed a rich reactive culture that embedded nostalgia for a 'simpler time', and sought to reinforce binaries - such as country/city, refined/uncouth - that helped strengthen the class and regional dimensions of political allegiance. In the Tory heartlands this was indeed a mass culture, with the party at its heart; it based itself on an Englishness that stood for the countryside and against the ascension of the working class but also for a fading imperialism. The party spanned generations and drew support from a naturalised apoliticism that was embedded in a range of social events - typically dining clubs for men and card games for women. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Young Conservatives claimed to be 'the largest voluntary political youth movement in the world', with members who 'revelled in an apolitical style'.<sup>9</sup> Many aspects of the mass Conservative Party of the post-war period can be seen as a reaction, cultural as much as political, to Labour's 1945 election victory.

Equally, Labour during this period can be understood not as a party representing a class, but as the formal party-political embodiment of an emancipatory workers' culture. As Kevin Morgan argued in *Soundings* 54, there had been a decades-long process of movement-building that had led up to the Attlee government, and the party during this period still bonded together a broad association of workers' groups. Individual membership was not necessary for participation; and - just as local Conservative Party associations were offering a buttressing socio-cultural environment in which to live the values of the party - so too did Labour provide a spiritual home for the working-class in its desire for emancipation and self-improvement, as well as an expressive framework for collective endeavour. As Sarah Benton puts it:

Like the prince of old, the party demanded loyalty, inspired love and devotion, promised delivery from evil, fought battles on behalf of the needy, brought nobility to the grey, drab lives of the many. Because it was collective, it also exacted discipline and demanded sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

But by the late 1960s, for a generation that had grown up since the war, these old affiliations were beginning to break up. For many, party politics itself was starting to look like an inevitably compromised way of achieving change in the world. The

## Soundings

clearly bounded cultures of left and right that had shaped the post-war political milieu were fragmenting into subcultures and consumer identities as the long boom sought to stimulate demand through an expansion of the role of advertising and marketing. One manifestation of this was a counterculture that (although it was itself a site of wide-ranging contestation) influenced a swathe of politically-inclined young people. Many of them now, instead of going into party politics, joined a pressure group or dropped out of 'straight' society altogether to join a commune in the hills.

Labour's record in government during the 1960s also contributed to the growth of the extra-parliamentary left, which became increasingly disillusioned with the Labour Party and began to devote greater energies to mass activity, especially in the anti-Vietnam war movement or groups like CND. Moreover, many detected a new direction in Labour; there was a growing chasm between the cabinet and parliamentary leadership - which seemed largely focused on managing the economy, and the vast mass of working people, who had expected the party to focus more strongly on representing their interests. As the May Day Manifesto put it:

We see the familiar priorities of power and money, set over against people. But now with one difference, that the agent of just these priorities, in Britain, is a Labour government.<sup>11</sup>

'Power' started to be a dirty word for many on the left.

It is no wonder that, as consumerism and individualism, as well as (more positively) a diverse understanding of identity, have become more deeply embedded in society, the methods of the professionalised policy caste that have emerged from the technocracies of the last fifty years continue to disappoint. As the main parties have seen their old constituencies break up and re-form - so that they have many fewer 'natural' supporters - they have sought to position themselves within a centre ground from which they seek to secure enough votes through arithmetical aggregation. Instead of seeking new ways of articulating politics and identifications, mainstream politicians have made a science of 'splitting the difference' to gain electoral majorities, creating arbitrage manifestos to attract just the right number of swing voters while alienating just that many less. This kind of aggregate policy-making is antithetical to the way that, under neoliberal culture, demonstration of individuality is encouraged through carefully expressed preferences; and it is

## Parties, causes and political power

even further away from a 'world-view' to which people can become card-carrying subscribers, as in the 1950s. It is understandable, therefore, that people adopt the view that it is better to keep your ideals intact by not entering into the corrupt, established system; better to press for system-change from outside it.

### A revulsion against power

Politicians do little to help recover their former status when they cast *themselves* as the enemy as they continue to divest government of power by handing it, instead, to the private sector, or to technocratic 'experts' and the once fashionable quangos. As Bryan Gould shows in this issue, economic policy in particular has been left to 'experts' - but unfortunately most of these experts have been financiers, bankers and economists closely linked to them. Corporate lobbying is presented as disinterested advice.

This all contributes to a sense that politicians and political parties desire, not a better society, but power over others. State institutions, instead of being an arena in which conflicting interests are negotiated, become simply a source of power for their occupants. Imogen Tyler's recent book *Revolting Subjects* makes the compelling case that state power is based on reproducing itself through the creation of abject subjects. Traveller communities, asylum seekers, 'chavs' - all have been 'othered' through a disgust manufactured by popular culture, the tabloid press and the rhetoric and laws of successive governments. She argues that in this process of drawing up boundaries between the outcast and the state, the state itself - and its elites - has become perceived as abject. This feeds into a popular 'common sense' that all politicians are corrupt. Peter Osborne's response to the summer riots of 2011 illustrates this sentiment well:

the criminality in our streets cannot be dissociated from the moral disintegration in the highest ranks of modern British society. The last two decades have seen a terrifying decline in standards among the British governing elite (*Daily Telegraph*, 11.8.11).

Tyler suggests that poor treatment of marginal people is a 'mechanism through which public consent is procured for policies and practices that effect inequalities

## Soundings

and fundamentally corrode democracy'.<sup>12</sup>

David Harvey also sees the undermining of democracy as part and parcel of the logic of neoliberal governance. As he argues, many neoliberals regard democracy 'as a luxury, only possible under conditions of relative affluence coupled with a strong middle-class presence to guarantee political stability'.<sup>13</sup> If there is a risk of unruly elements making the wrong decisions they tend to favour governance by experts and elites.

In such an ideological climate, for many who might otherwise want to participate in formal politics as a path to the good society, the idea of seeking political power has become debased. But power - political, economic, cultural - keeps on operating regardless of attitudes towards it. It is present in all societies, underpinning all networks. After Foucault, power is in all relationships with others, in the institutions we form and in our interactions with the natural world - upon which humans are dependent and of which they are a part. But neoliberal culture does everything it can to mask the way in which these relationships are constituted, hiding the exercise of power in layers of representation, and constraining potential counterposing forces within regimes of surveillance.

Neoliberalism has reorientated the common sense of politics so that it resides not in affinity with others and collective endeavour, but in the articulation of individualistic moral competence - including through the use of brands. As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, our politics has been co-opted into a brand culture where 'consumer citizens ... produce, accumulate, spend and trade moral capital just as they do social capital and economic capital'.<sup>14</sup> The very act of 'joining' something larger than the individual - subscribing to a collectively shared view of the world - becomes more difficult in a culture that encourages people to constantly 'shop around' for new ways of self-expression through material consumption. To publicly acknowledge the operations of power - for example through an act such as joining a political party - is to recognise that our individuality exists in unstable relationships with others and with the world around us; that we are not completely in control of our identities through a set of market-like transactions.

Resistance within this culture is of course still possible. Groups like Occupy and UK Uncut articulate potential political identities that tap into these branding sensibilities. They use snappy messaging, social media and effective graphic design. They claim cultural space within neoliberal culture for oppositional forms of

## Parties, causes and political power

political expression. More importantly, they also offer an authentic, deep connection between activists through a righteous opposition to the more glaring inequities of society - and the thrill (and hip credibility) of pushing the boundaries of legal protest.

The problem is that they, too, are so often subsumed within the narrative of abject power. In attempting to forge alliances between the 'abject subjects' at the bottom of society and the precarious youth of the middle class, they have based their politics on a rejection of all power structures.<sup>15</sup> Much as the political classes build consent through encouraging the expulsion of abject subjects, so the new protest groups build solidarity in opposition to all forms of leadership and power.

This attitude is now manifest across the campaigning left, even in once vanguardist circles. Clare Solomon, a prominent member of the 2011 student movement, recently attended an event about network politics, clutching a copy of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*. But when she was introduced as 'a leader of the student movement', she hurriedly denied that she was any such thing - despite having been elected the head of the University of London Union, the country's biggest branch of the NUS. This anecdote encapsulates so much of what has happened across many of the campaigning organisations that have flourished in the last few years. They seem to have become terrified or repulsed by the idea of holding actual power, or being seen to lead. For movements to have checks on egotistic or domineering leaders is clearly very, very worthwhile; but this goes far beyond modesty, pointing to a collapsed belief in the capacity of elected representatives to be more than simply self-serving tyrants. This seems to suggest that one reason that so many have abandoned political parties is that the aim of taking state power, following a leader, or being one, is something that is reviled.

Paul Mason's idea of the 'networked individual' - as seen in the recent wave of post-Arab spring global protests - offers an insight into what is at stake here. The self-contained liberal subject is placed in a network of other individuals as a heroic actor able to act rapidly against oppression and self-educate to deal with any emergent challenge. Yet this figure has become a contemporary ideal of emancipation precisely because it escapes, conceptually, the inevitability of unequal and constantly shifting power relations between individuals, institutions and groups, while retaining the idea of connection and participation. It is possible to celebrate this hero only because s/he seems to dissolve conflict in an emotional attachment

## Soundings

to a cause. S/he is a product of the levelling, dematerialising power of the internet, which seems capable of challenging existing power structures, and taking on the old order of states, militaries and secret services.

In this branded, networked world, formal political power is not just associated with corruption or disappointment: it evokes a visceral sense of fear and revulsion. For most, it is to be avoided at all costs, a contaminant that undoes the complex, mediated identities that are deployed to negotiate a society in which sovereign individuality is prized. Yet new social media networks, though they may have become mechanisms for the rapid aggregation of collective power, are being equally swiftly closed down as publicly responsive spaces by the monitoring of intelligence services, as well as by increasing domination by capital. Paolo Gerbaudo's article in *Soundings* 54 points to Egypt as evidence of what happens if this heroic but naive notion of networked leaderlessness continues to persist: the military order soon re-asserts itself.

The rejection of formal expressions of power and the idea of leadership represents more than an attempt to avoid the compromise with neoliberals that entry into the party system would require. It is ideological in both the common and Marxist senses. Horizontalism masks a deep cultural discomfort. It has no mechanism for taking power, and thus leaves itself open to the older hierarchies spawned by capital and the disciplinary apparatus of the state - whose interests it then may start to serve. An ideology of leaderlessness ultimately disempowers those who have found themselves momentarily powerful, as it leaves open the (conceptual and literal) spaces that have been seized, rendering them vulnerable to reclamation by reactionary hierarchies. The latter then use that space to renew themselves. This is evident in the Arab spring - where horizontalist activists have been squeezed between various vertical hierarchies in the post-revolutionary period - and in the West - where inchoate but popular opposition to the banking crisis has provided a language and vehicle for corporate power to re-assert itself (cf Cheerios and Wetherspoons).

One of the chief theorists of the rejection of power is John Holloway, whose influence on horizontalist movements across the globe continues to be felt. His argument stretches beyond a rejection of leaders to a refusal of the whole idea of power itself:

The problem of the traditional concept of revolution is perhaps not that it aimed too high, but that it aimed too low. The notion of

## Parties, causes and political power

capturing positions of power, whether it be governmental power or more dispersed positions of power in society, misses the point that the aim of the revolution is to dissolve relations of power, to create a society based on the mutual recognition of people's dignity. What has failed is the notion that revolution means capturing power in order to abolish power. What is now on the agenda is the much more demanding notion of a direct attack on power relations. The only way in which revolution can now be imagined is not as the conquest of power but as the dissolution of power.<sup>16</sup>

But if power, or the desire for power, becomes abhorrent, we have a serious problem. Getting things done is, arguably, what power is all about. How do we co-ordinate to address the serious problems facing society and the world? How do we tackle huge issues of climate change, inequality and prejudice? Without an understanding of, and engagement and negotiation with, the inevitability of power relations, how do we *do*?

### **A new politics of participation?**

It is likely that the solution lies in new forms of political participation. I do not subscribe to the belief that digital technologies will change the world overnight and usher in a new golden era of democracy. Only people, working together with an open mind and a willingness to understand and negotiate difference, can do that. Power can only become legitimate if it is seen as the expression of a popular will. In the present moment, this legitimacy looks most likely to be achieved through mass participation and collective decision-making with effective, accountable leadership. And this does not require the involvement of charismatic individuals, but agreed, transparent and legitimate ways of operating within and transforming existing power structures.

And it is here that digital technologies can facilitate those who are willing to find better ways of working with power - of making it seem less abject and 'dirty' - and those possibilities are starting to emerge in some of the fringe political parties of Europe. Italy's M5S, fronted by Beppe Grillo, while flawed in its pseudo-authoritarian posturing, proved that it is possible to build such a movement, while the German Pirate Party's 'liquid feedback' platform suggests that there are

# Soundings

sophisticated ways of enabling political debate and taking group decisions where large numbers of people engage directly in the process.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, campaign groups like 38 Degrees and Avaaz demonstrate that huge numbers of people can be mobilised very rapidly around specific causes, changing the way in which traditional campaigns mobilise their support. Significantly, in all these examples, an anti-power rhetoric, or at least the careful negotiation of power structures, remains a key part of their appeal. None have found an ideal model. But there is much to draw upon, synthesise, experiment with and iterate.

Political parties will need to embrace these structures of participation and collective policy making, or risk withering further. Whilst electoral politics has managed to accommodate many of the bigger campaigning organisations within the policy bubble of Westminster, the Gagging Bill suggests that they are afraid they can no longer contain the next wave of campaign groups. But if the groups themselves cannot let go of their distaste for the idea of power, and continue to be absorbed and neutralised within branding culture, the perceived threat may never actually materialise.

The current state of this zombie politics cannot last, but it's not yet clear what will come next.

*Based on research and idea discussed at length with Guy Shrubsole. All errors and opinion the author's own.*

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## Notes

1. There was a slight bump in 2005. For long term trends see Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, Polity 2007.
2. See Feargal McGuiness, 'Membership of UK political parties', House of Commons Library 2013.
3. Andrew Rawnsley, 'The Numbers That Add Up to Trouble for Political

## Parties, causes and political power

Parties', *Guardian*, 13 July 2013.

4. To steal a phrase. See Henry Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, Peter Lang 2010; and Andrew Quiggan, *Zombie Economics: How dead ideas still walk among us*, Princeton University Press 2010.

5. Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 10: The 2013 Report*, Hansard 2013.

6. G. Cohen and L. Mates, 'Grassroots Conservatism in Post-War Britain: A view from the Bottom Up', *History*, 98, 2013.

7. Membership figures of the Labour Party in this period do not include union and co-operative society associate members of Labour. This should be taken into account in understanding the scale of what the Conservative membership of the 1950s were reacting against. In 1953 there were around 6,000,000 subscribing members of the labour movement to the Conservatives Party's 2,800,000 members.

8. Andrew Thorpe, 'Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 62 No 2, 2009, p236, quoted in McGuinness, see note 2.

9. Lawrence Black, 'The Lost World of Young Conservatism', *The Historical Journal*, 51, 4, 2008.

10. Sarah Benton, 'The Decline of the Party', *New Times*, Lawrence and Wishart 1989, p337.

11. Raymond Williams, *The May Day Manifesto 1967/8*, reprinted online Lawrence and Wishart 2013, p1.

12. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, Zed Books 2013.

13. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, OUP 2005, p66.

14. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, New York University Press 2012, p145.

15. It is interesting to note that where these alliances have been most successful they have toppled governments. In the UK, the alliance failed on one level because, in the lack of links between the 2011 summer riots and student protests in 2010, there was no articulation of deeper social problems. Instead,

## Soundings

there were simply two groups of disconnected young people expressing their outrage at unmet expectations and broken promises.

16. Holloway's argument becomes more nuanced than this as his book progresses, but still within his themes is the idea that a more positive power-to can take the place of a negative power-over. This utopian perspective on the nature of power leaves activists open to the kind of critique offered above and that events have borne out. See John Holloway, *How To Change The World Without Taking Power*, Pluto Press 2002.

17. Unfortunately there is not space in this article for further exploration of either of these examples. However, they are interesting as much for their flaws as their successes, and are case studies I hope to return to at a later date.