PARTY DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL MARKETING: NO PLACE FOR AMATEURS?[1]

DENNIS KAVANAGH

It is almost an article of faith that political parties are in trouble. Falling election turnouts, and declines in identification, membership, activists and trust are just some of the symptoms (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Civic engagement is bypassing the parties and the electoral process and being channelled through less mediated means and single- issue groups. The malaise has coincided with the rise of political marketing. Is there a cause and effect relationship?

Anthony Downs (1957), writing from an economic standpoint, was one of the first to apply the logic of marketing to politics and democracy. He posited that voters and politicians were economic or market rationalists; voters were like consumers seeking the best buy and politicians who campaigned for votes, were like businessmen who sought sales. His analysis stands or falls on the analogy. But a political party differs from a commercial operation in at least two relevant respects. Because a political party usually campaigns to form the government of a country the scale of its ambitions dwarfs that of a commercial organisation. Second, a party often claims, in different degrees, to be internally democratic.

I want to argue that a casualty of political marketing, with its focus on ordinary voters, even weak partisans, has been internal party democracy, with its concerns for the views of party members. In this respect it is the latest in a number of trends that scholars of political parties over the last century have argued have weakened internal democracy.

I

For the first half of the twentieth century the changes in party organisation and ethos were largely a consequence of the move to mass politics and these impacted particularly on the internal dynamics and organisation of parties. In the second half of the century they were largely a consequence of rapid social and cultural change, which weakened the social foundations of partisanship among voters, and led to the emergence of new campaign approaches, particularly political marketing.

Robert Michels's Political Parties (1962) is the starting point for discussion of the internal dynamics of parties. Interestingly, it is subtitled "A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy". Michels held that, regardless of the party's formal rules about internal checks and balances, organisation led to a centralisation of power, oligarchy and the decline of internal democracy. The need for skilled organisers and vote-winning leaders, and the flow of power to them, meant that t he flow of power became more vertical, less horizontal. This analysis precedes the rise of political marketing.

Otto Kirchheimer (1966) saw a similar result emerging from different forces. He argued that the combination of social change, secularisation, and the decline of political ideology were weakening the links between parties and society in Western Europe. Class- and religious-based parties in particular were finding it difficult to mobilise support by traditional methods and appeals. They therefore turned to other techniques, including the early forms of political marketing. He noted such trends as:

- the downgrading of the influence of individual party members,

- the de-emphasis by parties of special class or religious appeals in favour of attracting voters across the population,

---

- the increasing autonomy of the leadership from internal checks and balances, and

- the reduction of ideology.

Political parties were no longer organisations of integration, in which support for a political party was part of a weltanschauung involving work, neighbourhood, friends, reading and groups. They were becoming catch all political parties , seeking voters regardless of their commitment to the party. Rather than the vote being a reassertion of a deep and long term commitment, the relationship now was a transient one, akin to a one-night stand taking place every four or five years.

Panebianco (1988) took this further, claiming that modern political parties had become electoral professional organisations, partly as a result of the consolidation of the trends noted by Kirchheimer, and also as a result of the parties' increased reliance on professionals recruited from the polling, media and advertising industries. Where Michels writes about the effects of specialisation and bureaucracy, Kirchheimer writes of de-ideologisation, and Panebianco writes of professionalisation. But all are varieties of a trend towards de-politicisation and a weakening of the vitality of political parties. More recently, Katz and Mair (1995, 2000) have pointed to the emergence of the cadre or cartel party. This is elite-directed, heavily dependent on the state or wealthy donors for funds, relies overwhelmingly on marketing professionals for campaigning, and lacks a mass membership. Indeed, perhaps such a party has little incentive to seekactive members as a source of funds or to mobilise the voters. The established parties can collude to ensure their own survival by influencing the rules governing state funding for parties or the allocation of TV time.

The 'old' political parties did not need marketing; they were characterised by:

1. A core voting constituency, one derived from key historical events and entrenched cleavage structures. In one of the earliest voting studies – and of the impact of election campaigns – Paul Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) were able to construct a highly accurate index of the political predispositions (Republican or Democrat) of American voters, based on their social backgrounds.

2. The need for active members to carry the party's message meant that election campaigning was labour intensive. In return, the party had to reward the activists by granting them some influence.

3. A distinctive message, deriving from an ideology and/or a defined constituency.

4. Campaigning was largely about reinforcing partisanship and mobilising the committed. All have declined and this has led to the present impasse for theories of internal democracy. Political marketing has been a response to that decline, but it also reinforces the decline of party democracy.

II

Political marketing is an uncomfortable bedfellow for internal party democracy for several reasons. Internal democracy, involving conferences, discussions, votes, amendments to resolutions and then referring them upwards to other bodies, is time-consuming. Marketing professionals, on the other hand, regard short lines of communication, speedy clearance for their proposals, and rapid responses to political opponents as necessities. Coping with a relentless 24 hour media has made inner party democracy something of a luxury. The guideline in modern campaigning is that speed kills. The marketing men prefer a party that is centralised, leader-friendly, allows them direct access to the key decision-makers, including the leader, and grants much autonomy to the people they liaise with- usually the party's communication directors. Internal debate should be sacrificed in the interests of presenting a clear message. It should have what Philip Gould, Blair's polling strategist, calls "a unitary command structure". Party activists thrive in the inner-directed party; marketing professionals look to an outer-directed party. They

give different answers to the question of who counts. For the former it is the members who need to be courted, for the latter it is the voters who need to be won over.

Marketing professionals attach priority to winning elections. Activists, particularly the so-called "purists", also like to win elections but not at the cost of compromising the party's "principles" or the integrity of its democratic procedures. They regard the latter almost as ends in themselves and therefore untouchable. A good illustration was the experience in 1959 of Mark Abrams, the Labour Party's first private pollster. He began a memo on electoral strategy with the statement: 'The object of the exercise is for Labour to win the next general election." What was obvious to him was not so to others. Some Labour strategists regarded the statement as heresy and there ensued a vigorous discussion on the opening sentence! After all, Labour knew who its supporters were– the working class and trade unionists – and they knew what the message was-- socialism. It goes without saying that Labour went down to a bad general election defeat in 1959, its third in a row. Yet a leading party thinker and election strategist, Dick Crossman, stated after the defeat that: "… those who assert that their sole object … should be to regain office seem to me to misconceive not merely the nature of British socialism, but the working of British democracy"(1960)

The focus in marketing is on target voters, particularly those voters the party needs to capture if it is to win the election; in other words, some voters are more important than others, and, tragically for the activists, marketing regards the task of reassuring the potential converts or potential defectors as a higher priority than appeasing established supporters. The classic case of activists rejecting such electoralist thinking and sustaining themselves against the opinion polls by a belief in a "silent majority" were the Barry Goldwater campaign in the 1964 US Presidential election and the George McGovern campaign for the Presidency in 1972.). These were the "purists", regarding compromise and moving towards some the ideas of the opposition as hypocrisy. Politics was a moral crusade, not just about pleasing the voters. Both candidates went down to landslide defeats. On the other hand, Clinton in 1992, seeking to reverse a series of Democrat defeats in Presidential elections, targeted 'Reagan Democrats', or the self-identified but disillusioned Democrats who had switched to Reagan. Before 1997 Blair relentlessly concentrated on 1992 Conservatives who had become disillusioned as well as former Labour voters (Gould, 1998). The effect of the Labour leaders heeding the findings of surveys and focus groups into the views (often socially and economic conservative) of these weak partisans was to move the party's policies and rhetoric into a centre ground, largely shaped over the preceding years by the political right. It also offended the activists who complained that their voices were ignored and that the party, in trying to reassure the middle class and "middle Britain", was becoming more of a preference-accommodating rather than a preference-shaping organisation. An unapologetic Philip Gould (xviii) might have had Crossman in his sights when he wrote: "New Labour should be obsessed with winning. Winning has to be the central aim of politics, because only with power can genuine politics start"

In the internally democratic party, the members play a major part in deciding policy and electing the leaders. But by their activities and demeanour they can also decisively shape the ethos and electoral image of the party. J.D. May, in his Law of Curvilinear Disparity (1973), has analysed the tendency for active party members to be more extreme than the less active ones, party voters, or party representatives who have to be elected by ordinary voters. For example, surveys of delegates at Republican and Democratic conventions have shown that the former are decidedly more conservative than party supporters and the latter more liberal than Democratic voters. (For a different view of recent trends, see Norris, 1995).

The best example in British politics of this tendency was the Labour Party in the 1983 general election. It was perhaps at its most internally democratic in choosing its manifesto for the election. This was a conference- and activist-shaped policy platform and many of the key policies were quite unrepresentative of (much to the left of) the views of Labour voters and even Labour MPs (Crewe, 1982, and 1983). Labour went down to a landslide defeat. In his report to

the party's annual conference the party's General Secretary, Jim Mortimer, claimed that in spite of the party's humiliating defeat in the election, there was no need to change the policies; 'It is not the party's policy but public opinion which needs to be changed'. The outlook was present before the 1979 election when the Labour Party's treasurer, Norman Atkinson, had opposed spending party money on private polls and claimed that the views of his local party activists were a better barometer of public opinion (Butler and Kavanagh, 1980,272). This is the classic example of the sales-oriented politician (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Labour was the British equivalent of the Barry Goldwater and George McGovern campaigns.

Finally, political marketing usually strengthens the party leadership in two respects. One is its ability to determine the party's central message. Old-style campaigning was decentralised into several hundred constituencies. Today, however, party headquarters controls the production of nation-wide election broadcasts, advertisements and posters, and can produce direct mail centrally for communication at local level. The second respect is that the decline of party identification and the growing influence of television and marketing all contribute to political personalisation, or to a focus (by the media and the parties themselves) on the leaders (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Increasingly, in modern politics, because the focus of television is so much on the leader the party's message is carried by and through him or her. The emphasis on discipline is to the leader and the centrally prepared message. Internal dissent, even debate, is discouraged, or any other activity that makes the leader appear weak in the eyes of the public. The effect has been to weaken political parties as collective bodies. Leaders may also calculate that it is advantageous to create a distance between themselves and the party, in part to gather a "personal" vote and in part to attract votes from other parties. Reagan and Clinton in the US and Thatcher and Blair in Britain have been particularly adept at this triangulation. Thus:

'The strategy of spatial leadership allows a president to remain an integral part of government, while at the same time affording opportunities to disengage selectively from many of its actual and reputed effects' (Foley, 2000, 30). Foley writes about the US and Britain, but the concept applies to other countries as well.

The use of high technology in modern campaigning also makes the foot soldiers and grassroots campaigners less important. Door to door canvassing, attendance at political meetings and many other traditional election activities are all in decline. Such operations as direct mail and tele- canvassing (which can involve reading from a centrally prepared script) do not necessarily need party workers. These tasks can be contracted out to others, as advertising, broadcasting and opinion polling are. The modern political party increasingly resembles a franchising operation, one that buys in expertise as and when it needs it.

The concept of campaigning professionalisation is defined largely in marketing terms. A professional party is one that has clear objectives, is disciplined, adheres to a message which has been shaped by research, implements it communications effectively, and is united. The effect of the above trends has been the emergence of new elites in the parties and the elevation of marketing and media people, who may have only a marginal or short term connection with the party. Their influence is understandably at its height during election campaigns, but they have been moving into government and their influence may be more continuous because of the emergence of the so-called permanent campaign in modern politics. They also command the headlines.

Richard Rose (2001, 105-106) reports that Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's Press Secretary, and Peter Mandelson attracted more media mentions in the first year of the 1997 Labour government than any other Cabinet minister, except for Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. If Michels pointed to organisation enhancing the role of bureaucrats, marketing has seen the rise in political parties of pollsters, campaign consultants, speechwriters, advertising agencies and, notably in the United States, fundraisers. Of course one needs to retain a sense of balance on these last points. Marketing has not (yet) taken over the heart and soul of party life. Leading politicians in Western Europe still think of themselves as public opinion experts,

prepared to back their own intuition, draw on the lessons of experience and do what they feel comfortable with. Marketing professionals have to tread warily when touching on policy making, even when they feel obliged to challenge policy positions on the grounds that they make the party or candidate unelectable. Politicians still occupy key positions in the final decision-taking committees. And yet…

III

Conclusion

Modern elitist theorists of democracy argue that internal party democracy does not matter much, that as long as the voters have a choice of parties at general elections we should not be overly concerned if the parties are oligarchical. Many writers on parties (Duvergér, 1954, McKenzie, 1963, and Maravell, 2003) have suggested that internal party democracy may be inimical to good government and the party's electoral effectiveness. In Sidney Webb's immortal phrase about Labour activists, they are "fanatics, cranks and extremists". What party leaders seem to want are members as cheerleaders (providing appreciative audiences for televised events and speeches) or generous financial donors (in the absence of state provision). What leaders do not want are party activists who criticise, make 'impossible' demands, or provide support for other party rivals and factions. But if incentives, in the form of electing leaders and shaping policy, are downgraded the only likely recruits for political parties are those who want to embark on a political career. It will be all chiefs and no Indians. As parties become empty shells, so they are liable to be taken over by other groups.

Party leaders still feel the need to pay at least lip service to the views of members. New Labour has turned the rhetoric and techniques of democracy back on the activists. Blair has used ballots of all members, taking decisions on candidate selection and policy resolutions from the activists, to legitimise his review of the party's aims and objectives and the draft manifestoes for the 1997 and 2001 general elections. The Conservative party has followed. But the exercise is controlled from the centre; members can only support or reject the proposal presented to them. It is a form of plebiscitary democracy in which democracy is combined with elitism. Michels would have readily understood what one observer has termed "democracy as emasculation" (Webb, 1994). There is, however, a positive case for active as opposed to passive membership. Party activity is a form of civic engagement, an opportunity for people to work together in the public realm, a means of building social capital. Activists might be used to revive the old two-step flow of influence, mediating between the party and the media on the one hand and the public on the other. A brand (be it New Labour or compassionate Conservatism) is more likely to be effective if it is accepted and represented by active members. They can interpret political events and media reporting of them in a personalised way to friends and neighbours. Indeed, it is almost conventional wisdom now in Britain that local party activity does make a difference in closely contested seats at general elections (Seyd and Whiteley,2002; Denver and Hands 1998).

But of course this is not how commentators write about campaigns. They analyse election outcomes in terms of marketing successes or failures. The media likes to 'unmask' or write 'the hidden story' of elections. Thus there is 'the marketing of Maggie' (Thatcher) or 'the selling of the President '(Nixon, Reagan, the two Bushs). Often these reports are written with the connivance of polling and advertising personnel who may have a commercial interest in such stories. They want to trumpet their role in victory and distance themselves from electoral failure. Increasingly more and more writing about election campaigns is about process, strategy and the game. To conclude: political marketing is an answer to the decline of political parties, particularly as electoral organisations, and also a cause of the decline of the internal vitality of parties.

REFERENCES

Butler D. and Kavanagh D. (1984). The British General Election of 1983. Macmillan

Crewe I. (1982). "Labour and the Electorate" in D Kavanagh ed. The Politics of the Labour Party. Allen & Unwin.

Crewe I. (1983). "How to Win a Landslide without Really Trying", in A. Ranney and H. Penniman. eds. Britain at the Polls 1983 AEI

Crossman R. (1960) Labour in the Affluent Society, Fabian Society

Denver, D. and Hands, G. Modern Constituency Electioneering. Frank Cass

Downs A (1957) An Economic Theory of Democracy Harper Collins

Duverger M. (1954) Political Parties. Methuen

Foley M. (2001) The Rise of the Presidency. Manchester University Press

Gould P. (1999). The Unfinished Revolution. Little Brown

Katz R. and Mair P. (1995) "Changing Models of Party Organisation: The Emergence of the Cartel Party". Party Politics Vol 1 pp 5-29

Kirchheimer O. (1966) "The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems" in M. Weiner and J. LaPalombara eds. Political Parties and Political Development. Princeton University Press

Lazarsfeld P. et al. (1948) The People's Choice. Columbia University Press.

Lees-Marshment, J. (2001). Political Marketing and British Political Parties. Manchester University Press

Mair, P. and van Biezen, I. (2001) "Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies" Party Politics Vol 7 pp5-21

Maravell, J. (2003) "The Political Consequences of Internal Party Democracy " Working Paper 2003/190. Madrid

May, J. (1973) "Opinion Structure of Political Parties; the Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity" Political Studies vol 21 pp 133-51

McKenzie, R. (1963) British Political Parties. Heinemann

Michels, R (1962). Political Parties. Free Press

Norris, P. (1995) "May's Law of Curvilinear Disparity Revisited" Party Politics, vol. 1 pp 29-49

Panebianco, A. (1988). Political Parties. Organisation and Power. Cambridge University Press

Rose, R. (2001) The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World.. Polity

Seyd, P. and Whiteley, P. (2002) Labour's New Grassroots. Palgrave

Swanson D. and Mancini P. eds. (1996) Politics, Media and Modern Democracy. Praeger

Webb, P. (1994) "Party Organisational Change" in R Katz and P Mair eds How Parties Organise. Sage

❖ ❖ ❖