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# *The New Partisanship*

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The dramatic expansion of the Labour Party membership over the last year is sharply at odds with conventional political wisdom that the political party is a dying form. It was only recently that one of the most celebrated political scientists of western party politics, citing declining public enthusiasm and an increasingly homogenous political class, declared that ‘the age of party democracy has passed.’<sup>1</sup> Recent events in Labour and beyond can hardly disprove the thesis, but they suggest lingering popular interest in the idea of the party. A generalized process of steadily declining membership now seems too coarse a forecast. There are, it seems, a large number of people who, given the right conditions, are still looking for something to sign up to.

But what are they signing up to? The renewal of engagement with the Labour party is a good moment to take stock of where the interest lies, as well as to reflect more generally on what is distinctive to the partisan outlook. The re-emergence of the party as a site of mobilisation invites a broader interpretation of partisanship: not just as a collective that aims to win electoral power but one that does so as part of a principled, long-term project. As well as having important implications for the party’s fidelity to its past and for its wider engagement with the general public, this poses distinctive challenges as it opens up to a larger supporter base.

## Movements and Parties, Movements as Parties

Labour’s leadership election and the party’s expansion since have been notable for the visible intersection of two political forms – the party and the social movement. Often their relation has been conceived as one of mutual detachment, even rivalry: while the party pursues long-term goals through the slow processes of political institutions, the social movement rejects this in favour of spontaneous action for more immediate and sharply-defined goals. Yet today one sees efforts to put them in a complementary relation, and indeed to integrate the two. ‘Labour is a social movement or it is nothing,’ Corbyn famously said, and the party seems to have drawn vitality of sorts from the expansion of its activist base with movement-based structures such as Momentum.

This of course is part of a larger pattern: some of the most striking contemporary political mobilisations have involved movements and parties cooperating in tandem, to the degree that the boundary between them becomes blurred. Such has been the story in the Mediterranean with the emergence of Podemos and Syriza, as it was with the Latin American mobilisations on which they consciously modelled themselves. Where larger trends towards declining party membership and electoral participation have been countered, it has tended to be in this hybrid movement-party form. The interest of the Labour case – also that of the Scottish National Party since the 2014 referendum – is how it shows the potential for such dynamics in relation to long-standing parties, not just those that have recently formed.

On the one hand this can be grasped as the effort of party members to remodel their association to take in some of the qualities of movements. Amongst these may be counted a

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<sup>1</sup> Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the Void: the Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso), p.1.

large supporter base, a non-hierarchical mode of organisation (or at least a stated commitment to this), and a tight connection with targeted campaigns at the micro level. In an age of apparently ever more professionalised organisations, and of public disillusion with the same, these qualities have obvious appeal.

On the other hand, the movement / party convergence can be understood as an attempt by movement activists to adopt some of the techniques of the partisan. One of these is the aim to form an enduring organisation. Micah White, one of the founding figures of the Occupy movement, expresses the point well. Referring to the Occupy movement's rapid initial expansion, he notes: 'You can't maintain that exponential growth forever; people get burned out. ... That sudden peaking has to somehow be locked in, some way of giving it a structure that is able to persist. Looking at where we need to go today in terms of social movements, we need to be able to combine the sudden peaking of a social movement with the ability to create structures that give it a permanence. That's why I talk a lot about the hybridization between social movements and political parties.'<sup>2</sup>

Another of the features of partisanship such activists may be attracted to is the aim to control political institutions from the inside – as opposed to merely influence from without, on the conventional model of the social movement. There is renewed interest in competing for control of the state rather than acting as a counter-weight to it. As the same speaker observes concerning the Occupy experience: '... We learned again that actually if you want to have sovereignty in this world, you have to either be elected or you have to militarily overthrow the sovereign. I think that right now the only practical or viable option is to become elected. ... Social movements have to win elections.'<sup>3</sup> Importantly, from the perspective of politically committed agents, winning elections is a means to advance a political cause they believe in, not the purpose for which that cause exists.

Labour's trajectory over the last year has to be understood then in the context of a wider series of encounters between movements and parties. This renewed interest in the partisan mode will be welcome to those who suspect there is no better route to meaningful citizenship and far-reaching political change, and that widespread disenchantment with parties is all too convenient for those wanting to see the power structures of contemporary societies left largely undisturbed.<sup>4</sup> Equally, the participatory features of movement politics may prove a valuable corrective to the ever more professionalised structures that have characterised parties in recent decades.

What exactly does it mean though to take up the partisan method? Is it simply a matter of organising so as to contest elections? Much that has been written on parties would suggest that it is exactly this and no more. Yet this seems to miss some of the essentials of the practice.

### What is a party?

In recent years, political scientists, the media and politicians alike have tended to treat parties as little more than vehicles for winning elections. Their overriding goal, in this view, is to combine the preferences of citizens for the purpose of obtaining a share in government.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Micah White, *Los Angeles Review of Books*: 'The Challenge of Protest in Our Time: Micah White on Social Change Movements, Theories of Revolution, and Moving on from Occupy Wall Street', 17<sup>th</sup> September 2015 (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/the-challenge-of-protest-in-our-time-micah-white-on-social-change-movements-theories-of-revolution-and-moving-on-from-occupy-wall-street/>)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> For a defence of why parties matter, see White, Jonathan and Lea Ypi (2010), 'Rethinking the Modern Prince: Partisanship and the Democratic Ethos', *Political Studies* 58 (4), pp.809-28.

What distinguishes parties from each other on this account is ultimately their skill in knowing which buttons to press to win votes. Attached to this concept is a theory of motivation: party members, it is suggested, are in it largely for the spoils of office.

What the image of the party as the election-winning machine misses are the transformative aspirations that define partisanship.<sup>5</sup> Historically, parties have consistently sought to distinguish themselves from other kinds of political formation such as factions and interest groups. The basis for the distinction has generally been an appeal to political ideals intended to shape the fate of the political community as a whole, both in the short and the long term. Even where particularist identities – ethnic, religious or class-related – have been invoked, it was to incorporate them in a larger political project conceived as a process of collective learning and enrichment. Ramsay MacDonald's portrait of the Labour Party in his 1919 work on *Parliament and Revolution* makes the point well: 'it [the Party] believes in the class conflict as a descriptive fact, but it does not regard it as supplying a political method. It strives to transform through education, through raising the standards of mental and moral qualities, through the acceptance of programmes by reason of their justice, rationality and wisdom. ... It walks with the map of Socialism in front of it and guides its steps by the compass of democracy.'

This is also where history comes in. The image of the party as an electoral machine misses the distinct temporality of the practice. Partisanship is a long-term, cumulative activity. A party typically defines itself by goals that cannot be realised in the short term but that require constancy of political commitment across time – in Labour's case including notions of equality, justice, and collective responsibility. What is more, a party pursues such goals through the relatively slow mechanisms of political institutions – in contrast to more immediate forms of protest such as strikes and boycotts. The party is the organised expression of a tradition: it is an association built up over time and projected into the future, centred on normative commitments intended to endure.

This is important because it bears on the reasons for which individuals might align with a party and judge the credentials of their leaders. The material benefits of association tend to be small, at least for most members most of the time. Rather than as a means of personal advancement, partisan affiliation is better seen as a way to promote political commitment in association with likeminded others and in the knowledge that everyone contributes to a larger, long-term project. It depends on the expectation that today's activities will continue into the future, and draws nourishment from the idea they are the extension of earlier struggles. Indeed, there is a sense in which partisans owe a duty of fidelity to the commitments of their predecessors, as those who nurtured the party they now inherit. To invoke the past in this context is to honour the future-oriented actions of those predecessors.<sup>6</sup>

One of the themes of the 2015 Labour Party leadership election was the frequent appeal to the authority of the party's past. Jeremy Corbyn talked of the importance of being 'true to the roots of the party', while his supporters speak of 'reclaiming' it from the Blair years. Founding figures such as Keir Hardie were invoked from all sides as a way to connect today's issues with yesterday's cause. It is easy to dismiss such moves as merely rhetorical – an attempt to put speakers in a favourable light and dignify present debates. Here as elsewhere, history can be used and abused. It is clear that appeals to the past are often tactical – a way of positioning oneself on an issue. But there seems to be something deeper here too. This invocation of the past arguably goes to the heart of what a party is, as a continuing entity irreducible to the pursuit of interests confined to the present and as a group that outlives the contribution of a particular set of individuals.

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<sup>5</sup> We discuss this issue at length in our forthcoming book: White, Jonathan and Lea Ypi (in press), *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford: OUP).

<sup>6</sup> White, Jonathan (online early), 'The Party in Time', *British Journal of Political Science*.

Appeals to the party's history are properly a central part of a leadership election. Alongside the strategic questions of who can best unify the party, and the desirability of a particular set of policies taken in isolation, there is a reasonable concern about how the present squares with a longer tradition, a concern that arguably taps something essential about the ethics of partisanship. The point is generally overlooked by those who suggest the decisive criterion for assessing leadership candidates should always be their 'electability' in a General Election. To limit the assessment of someone like Corbyn to an analysis of his personal virtues as leader or his ability to defeat the Tories is to avoid the larger questions about what Labour should be and what it has become, what kind of commitments it continues to promote, and what is the best way to nurture and sustain such commitment in the light of contemporary transformations in politics, the economy or society.

It goes without saying that there will always be competing interpretations of what the party stands for and how its commitments fit with those of its longer history – whether, for instance, Corbyn or Kendall better reflect its core ideas, and who is better placed to extend its tradition under present conditions. While many see Corbyn's election as restoring Labour to its pre-Blairite path, others note how his ideas also contain significant departures.<sup>7</sup> Traditions are never static or homogeneous, and how to channel them is often a point of debate. But what seems clear is that there are distinctive constraints on how a party at a given moment may choose its course. Even where a compromise with changing times is required, such a compromise must be motivated by more than a concern for winning the next election. Only some combinations of preference will do – as many Labour partisans seem acutely aware.

### The Party and the Public

Principled commitments, traditions, and the long march through institutions for a cause that is invariably long-term – these features make for a better description of partisanship than the mere practice of contesting elections. The campaign for the vote is the method rather than the spirit of the enterprise.

What though of the larger public, many of whose members may be indifferent to that spirit? Following the Corbyn ascendancy, many have condemned what they see as the inward-looking tendency on the Labour left, a tendency for partisans to prize principles at the expense of engaging with those beyond the party. The political scientist Richard Katz speaks of a problem of 'two masters', such that the leadership of a party is caught between the radical demands of its activists and the moderation of the median voter.<sup>8</sup> Commentators in the media talk of 'un-electability' and the prospect of unending Tory rule. The suggestion is that a party that takes its principles, traditions and aims too seriously is liable to become an election-losing machine.

Again this view relies on the idea that a party's role is to combine preferences already formed. The party should go to where the voters 'are', and if the voters have not moved to the left then neither should the party.<sup>9</sup> But this view is hard to maintain. Voters are generally in many places at once: that is to say, they may be responsive to a wide range of political messages, and what stand as their preferences form in relation to the ideas and propositions they encounter. Public opinion is a process rather than the sum of privately-held views.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/jeremy-corbyn-experiment-british-labour-party>

<sup>8</sup> Katz, Richard (2014), 'No man can serve two masters: party politicians, party members, citizens and principal-agent models of democracy', *Party Politics* 20 (2), pp.183-93.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Liz Kendall, 'Labour must ditch 'fantasy' that Britain has moved to the left', *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2015 (<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/21/liz-kendall-labour-leadership-election>).

<sup>10</sup> White, Jonathan (2009), 'The Social Theory of Mass Politics', *Journal of Politics* 71 (1), pp.96-112.

Antonio Gramsci put it in his *Prison Notebooks*, ‘the counting of “votes” is only the final ceremony of a long process’, because opinions are not ‘spontaneously born in each individual brain’, they have ‘a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion – a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality’.<sup>11</sup>

A party then can never just go to where the voters are. It cannot simply follow public opinion, because public opinion is the evolving outcome of a process in which parties themselves are involved and which they must take responsibility for shaping. A party must decide how it wants to influence that process. It must select from the range of resonant political messages those that it wants to advance. In anchoring this choice in the principles and aims of the partisan tradition, it is not condemning itself to be ‘unelectable’, because what is electable remains open to influence. The ‘median voter’, if there is such a thing, is not what a party must chase but what it must help to define.

There may well be limits to where the process can be taken. There are certain ideas that, even with the greatest political skill, it will prove impossible to persuade large numbers of citizens to endorse. How could it be otherwise? – such constraints are what allow one to view public opinion as a democratic idea, not just a process of manipulation. But no amount of opinion poll data purporting to identify public preferences at a given moment can determine where the limits to that process lie. The costs of adhering to principle are uncertain. Indeed, given a principled stance elucidates what a party stands for, it may well be an electoral asset.

## Conclusion

What the process that brought to Corbyn to the head of the Labour Party did was question the model of parties as electoral machines and raise a larger set of issues about their democratic function. It gave reminder that a party properly understood is a community of principles, where people with broadly similar values, commitments and conceptions of justice make common decisions, take joint risks and distribute collective responsibility for how they want to shape future political life. Those who voted for Corbyn voted against the personalisation of politics, against a model of the party exclusively focused on the image and media appeal of the leader, and against an exclusive emphasis on how elections can be won. They voted to reappropriate the radical roots of the Labour party as an agent of social transformation, guided by a process where everyone, not just the leader, is understood to be responsible for the final outcome.

In an optimistic reading, the receptiveness of the Labour leadership to the politics of social movements promises greater responsiveness to the concerns of those activists who have felt excluded and alienated by mainstream institutions yet who are natural sympathisers with what Labour has traditionally stood for. If a party is to be understood more as a community of the likeminded than as an aggregate of those carrying the party card, there are perhaps fewer reasons to resent the recent rapprochement between the party and a broader set of like-minded social movements. But there are distinct difficulties here too. One of the challenges for the Labour Party – and for others like it across Europe and beyond – is how to retain this sense of the party as a long-term association while embracing the more participative model of a movement. To be sure, many of the newcomers to Labour may be in it for the long term and concerned precisely to reconnect the party with its past. The Corbyn phenomenon speaks partly to the enduring relevance of political commitment to democratic citizenship and to the

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<sup>11</sup> Gramsci, Antonio (1971), ‘The Modern Prince’, in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart), pp.123-205: here p.193.

appeal of siding with a principled tradition. But for those who embrace the movement ethic, the attachments may be correspondingly different. In pioneering more fluid forms of association, the party needs to be careful not to weaken the cross-temporal outlook on which the partisan model depends.

It also needs to be sensitive to the degrees of affiliation to the party of both members and supporters, reflecting these in its day-to-day division of labour and ascription of responsibilities. The recent rapprochement between party and movements is ambitious, important and largely welcome, and responds to well-documented transformations in the nature of political mobilisation in contemporary democracies. With the right conceptual and political strategies, it might be a promising way to address some of the most concerning trends of depoliticisation and democratic disaffection, especially among younger people. And yet there are no ready-made recipes for how to accomplish this integration. The challenges it raises need to be carefully scrutinised in an ongoing process of intra-party discussion and deliberation, in a spirit of joint assumption of responsibility rather than scaremongering about the next election.