

## **POPULIST DEMOCRACY VS. PARTY DEMOCRACY**

(This is an unfinished draft of a chapter being prepared for eventual inclusion in Yves Mény (ed.), *Populism*.)

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In their earlier contribution to this volume, Yves Mény and Yves Surel draw a distinction between “popular democracy” and “constitutional democracy,” the two pillars on which rest both the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic regimes. Following this distinction, the popular democracy pillar is identified with an emphasis on the role of the demos - the free association of citizens, the maintenance of free elections, and the freedom of political expression. Popular democracy entails government *by* the people. The constitutional pillar, on the other hand, is identified with an emphasis on the institutional requirements for good governance - the establishment of rules and constraints limiting executive autonomy, the guaranteeing of individual and collective rights, and the maintenance of a system of checks and balances that are intended to prevent the abuse of power. The constitutional pillar may be associated with the defence of the public good, entailing government *for* the people. For Mény and Surel, an ideal democracy should aim to establish an equilibrium between both pillars.

This distinction between the two pillars of democracy is important in itself, and the belief that both need to be in balance has also become increasingly evident across much contemporary writing on democratic theory. In a sustained and persuasive plea on behalf of what he defines as modern republicanism, for example, Philip Pettit (1997) has outlined a model of governance in which he argues in favour of the benefits of institutional pluralism and deliberation and against a more populist model in which the demos rules virtually without constraint. For Pettit, constitutionalism actually counts for more than simple popular democracy. More recently, in an assessment of the legitimacy problems facing modern European government, both nationally and at the level of the European Union, Fritz Scharpf (1999) has developed a similar argument, urging a much greater reliance on output-oriented democracy, with an emphasis on government for the people, rather than on input-oriented democracy, with its emphasis on government by the people. Indeed, for Scharpf the latter seems increasingly unworkable.

At one level, it might appear ironic that it is precisely during a period in which democracy has finally been seen to emerge triumphant (Hadenius, 1997) that so many theorists should now focus so much attention on the apparent need to balance the voice of the demos. Little more than a decade ago, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was widely and unequivocally heralded as ensuring the full expression of popular democracy in previously authoritarian regimes. Now, as the century turns, attention has shifted towards the consideration of how that voice might be restrained. In other words, democracy may be triumphant, but, as Mény and Surel suggest, its electoral pillar is increasingly seen to require a constitutionalist curb. Popular democracy now needs to be balanced by constitutional democracy.

At another level, however, there are at least two strong reasons why this reasoning seems to find so much contemporary favour. In the first place, as an increasing volume of literature testifies (e.g., Nie et al, 1997; Norris, 1999), popular democracy itself now seems that much less robust. Popular engagement in the political process is waning across almost throughout the advanced democracies, with lower levels of electoral participation, declining levels of party membership, and a fading sense of attachment or identification with conventional political alternatives (for an exhaustive review of these trends see Dalton, 2001). At the same time, ample evidence has been adduced to suggest that citizens are not only increasingly

indifferent towards the electoral process, but also increasingly distrustful of the leaders that it produces. In fact, as Dahl (1999: 1; see also Mény & Surel, this volume) has recently emphasised, we now witness quite a paradoxical combination of increasingly widespread support for democracy, on the one hand, and declining confidence in its functioning, on the other. Nor is this lack of confidence in the day-to-day functioning of democracy visible only in terms of mass popular attitudes. Distrust or disregard is also evident within the academy, as it were, with some of the recent public policy literature in particular (e.g., Majone, 1996; Blinder, 1997) urging the case for the transfer of key decision-making powers from elected politicians to more politically neutral experts. Part of the problem here is that as government itself has become increasingly depoliticised and routinised, it is seen to require the sorts of skills and expertise that are more readily associated with meritocracy rather than with democracy as such. Those who can win the modern game of elections are not necessarily seen as those best suited to governing our democracies.

Second, and in a related vein, popular democracy may come to be downgraded in favour of a more constitutional democracy precisely because it no longer appears authoritative.<sup>1</sup> In other words, popular democracy is no longer experienced as the means for settling great struggles between alternative political visions – even should such alternative visions be found to exist.<sup>2</sup> Politics is no longer about groups in society fighting to gain access to government in order to establish their own particular political, social or ideological rules of the game. That period, as we know, has passed. And even had it not passed, the capacity to provide authoritative solutions would in any case have become constrained by the increasing inability of governments to intervene with substantial effect. Whether through globalisation, internationalisation, or even the more local Europeanisation, the capacity of governments to exert political control, and hence the capacity of popular democracy to mandate government action, has now become severely limited. Partly in recognition of this new environment, governments in contemporary democracies appear also increasingly keen to play down any direct ‘hands on’ responsibility, seeing their role instead as being that of a facilitator rather than a manager, or as that of ensuring the conditions in which market solutions can be found rather than as a controller of those markets. These conceptions further suggest that the role of government is to enhance the freedom of citizens and so to allow these citizens to find their own solutions. Bringing civil society back in means pushing the state into the background, and this further undermines the relevance of the popular democracy pillar.

But there is also another reason why these two senses of democracy – the popular and the constitutional – appear to be separating from one another, and why the very idea of attempting a balance or equilibrium has begun to engage attention. Put very simply, one of the major reasons why it is now possible to speak plausibly of a

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is also suggested by Schedler (1997: 10-12).

<sup>2</sup> As Perry Anderson (2000, 17) noted recently: “Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view. It can be put like this. For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions – that is, systematic rival outlooks – within the thought-world of the West; and scarcely any on a world-scale either....Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.”

distinction between popular and constitutional democracy is that the key institution which once bound these two elements together – the political party – is itself fading in importance. In other words, as the role of political parties, as well as the associated model of party democracy, becomes less relevant, the conventional linkage that existed between popular democracy and constitutional democracy becomes eroded. In this sense it is not so much that the two senses of democracy are simply perceived as increasingly separate from one another, but more that they are also growing apart in practice.

In the remainder of this chapter I will attempt to fill out this last argument by briefly reviewing the major changes that are currently impacting on political parties and by looking at how these may be undermining the assumptions involved in the traditional conception of party democracy. The changes which I discuss concern both party identities and the functions which parties are assumed to perform. I will then go on to discuss how these changes have served to weaken the parties' mediating role and hence how they have also offered an enhanced *scope* for the revival of populism. Two senses of populism are relevant here. On the one hand, there is the more conventional sense of populism, conceived as a form of popular protest against the political establishment. On the other hand, there is a more "respectable" and possibly more relevant sense of populism, here conceived as a means of linking an increasingly undifferentiated and depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and nonpartisan system of governance. It is on the latter conception of populism, and its practice, that I concentrate.

### **The Erosion of Party Democracy**

Throughout twentieth-century Europe, the linkage between voters and governments under conditions of mass democracy has been organised primarily by party. Voters chose between parties, however loosely defined and organised; representation was channelled through parties; governments were formed by parties, particularly in parliamentary systems; accountability was assured through parties. As Rudolf Wildenmann (1986) once put it, "party government [was] the crucial agency of institutional legitimation." This emphasis on party as representative *and* as governor – this emphasis on party democracy – has involved a number of assumptions and beliefs about how modern democracy functioned (see also Katz, 1986; Katz, 1997). These have included:

- (a) an acceptance that the link between voters and governments is mediated rather than being direct, with the organised political party acting as the principal mediator within the electoral channel;
- (b) a belief that the electorate is characterised by a set of diverse and reasonably enduring interests which more or less compete with one another for the distribution of scarce public resources;
- (c) a belief that these interests are reflected more or less faithfully in the programmes of the parties that compete for electoral support;
- (d) an acceptance that the governments which are formed as a result of this process of party competition are more or less partisan, with the winners enjoying the right to pursue the programme(s) which they themselves have elaborated and with the losers being obliged to accept that their concerns may be excluded or ignored; hence, in any political solution derived through this process, there are winners and losers.

As I will suggest, however, it is now increasingly difficult to sustain any of these assumptions. Indeed, given that the partisan character of both representation and government has been subject to significant erosion within contemporary democracies in recent years, it is now becoming increasingly difficult to characterise modern democracy as party democracy. Two elements are important here: changes in party identity, and changes in the functions which parties can be seen to perform.

### *Weakening Party Identities<sup>3</sup>*

The first factor that may be cited here involves the blurring of the ideological or programmatic identity of at least those parties that inhabit the mainstream of the party system. Parties increasingly share voters with one another, and, with the decline in the strength of affective loyalties, they are now even more keen to direct their appeals into what had once been the traditional heartlands of their opponents. The result, as noted above, is that the notion of politics as social conflict, in which the parties were seen to represent the political interests of opposing social forces, is now less and relevant. But not only are more or less all voters now potentially available to all parties, so also are more or less all parties available to all voters, for the notion of politics as ideological conflict, which loomed so large at the height of the Cold War, has now also ebbed away. In both social and ideological terms, therefore, there is now less opposition being expressed through processes of party competition.

In addition, and again as noted above, governments, and the parties which occupy them and try to oppose them, now experience increasing constraints on their capacity for policy manoeuvre. This is something which is being experienced by all western governments in the internationalised and globalised economy, but is particularly pronounced within the European Union system. Parties are increasingly constrained to share programmes and policies, and, when in government, they share in their implementation. Rhetorical flourishes may well allow the voter to distinguish the parties in any particular government from those in opposition, but it now appears that substantive contrasts in the practice of policy are increasingly difficult to discern. Government proceeds by regulation rather than by partisan policy-making.

Nor do the parties present themselves as being very different from one another, for organisational distinctiveness has also become blurred. As parties fish in the same shared pool of voters, they tend to adopt similar organisational and campaigning techniques. Modes of communicating with potential voters have also become more professionalised and hence standardised across parties, with the sometimes varying appeals being couched in similar techniques of persuasion, be these provided by the professional spin doctors, advertising agencies, or whatever. In most cases, the individual parties have now abandoned their own separate party presses, and they now compete with one another for space and attention in the shared national media and on the public broadcasting networks. For voters, it is now almost impossible to filter out alternative messages or to listen exclusively to just one source of political cues. To pay attention to one party is to pay attention to all, since each will have its own spokesperson in the various studio discussions, or will have its own comments to offer for inclusion in the various newspaper reports.

The final point to note here concerns strategic identity, and here too the most evident trend has been towards the waning of distinctiveness. Almost all parties are now

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<sup>3</sup> The following points are treated at greater length in Mair (1997, 1998)

governing parties, in the sense that each now maintains a realistic expectation of enjoying a least a limited period in office. Few if any important parties are now seen as being permanently excluded from participation in cabinets. In most cases, however, and not least as a result of the increased levels of fragmentation which have tended to mark European party systems over the past two decades, access to office usually requires the formation of coalitions, and hence the building of cross-party friendships and alliances. And what is most striking about these processes, especially as they have developed over the past ten years, is that they are characterised by an increasing level of strategic promiscuity: French socialists now share office with French ecologists, as do German socialists with German ecologists; Dutch secular parties now share office without requiring the traditional bridging mechanisms provided by the religious mainstream; the British Labour Party has proved able to build an informal coalition alliance with the Liberals; in Italy, the incorporation of the former fascist National Alliance into a right-wing coalition was succeeded by another novel government which included both the PDS and elements of the former Christian Democrats. In short, long established patterns of government formation are now being broken, and parties which were once traditional rivals are now finding common governmental ground.

All of this suggests it is now less and less easy for voters to see meaningful ideological or purposive differences between parties, or to see these differences as being particularly relevant to their own particular needs and situations. In other words, because of the changing relations between parties, as well as changes in the way they present themselves, voters seem to find it less and less easy to see them as representatives as such. At the same time, as a vast volume of literature on voting behaviour attests, these voters themselves orient towards politics in increasingly individualistic or particularistic terms. This obviously means that there is less of a sense of competing collective interests operating at the electoral level, and hence it becomes more difficult for parties to articulate and aggregate these interests even if they were minded to do so.

#### *Changing Party Functions*

The second major element involved here is part of this same process, but is best seen as involving a shift in the balance of the functions traditionally performed by parties in mass democracy. In fact, parties have always been associated with two distinct sets of functions: a set of representative functions, on the one hand, and a set of more procedural or institutional functions, on the other hand. In recent years, however, and for reasons identified above, the first set has become less meaningful, while the second has acquired more prominence.

The first function classically associated with political parties is that of integrating and mobilising the citizenry. This is, or was, a major representative function, but one which can now easily be seen as redundant. In other words, while the integration and mobilisation of citizens is an important function in any polity, it is, as Pizzorno (1981) has argued, historically contingent, and may be seen as no longer necessary or even possible in fully mobilised democracies. This is a function which (mass) parties performed in the past. It is not something which they are now called on to perform in contemporary democracies.

The second function classically associated with parties is also representative, and involves the articulation and aggregation of interests. In contemporary democracies, however, this articulation function is now shared with other non-party associations and movements, as well as with the media. And although the aggregation of

interests does remain relatively important, in that conflicting demands have to be reconciled at some political level, this latter can usually be subsumed under the function of public policy formulation (see below). Indeed, the expression of popular interests and demands now often occurs outside the party world, with the parties increasingly contenting themselves with simply picking up signals that emanate elsewhere. In this sense, it does not seem necessary to have parties act as intermediaries as far as the articulation of interests are concerned.

The third function is also largely representative, and involves the formulation of public policy. In practice, however, it appears that parties are also proving less necessary here, in that policies can also be formulated by experts or by ostensibly non-political bodies. In other words, parties are less necessary when public policy becomes depoliticised, and this occurs when the scope for policy manoeuvre becomes constrained, or, as increasingly seems to be the case, when political leaders deliberately delegate decision-making in order to evade political accountability. Parties are necessary, however, when decisions are based on political grounds, or when choices are framed primarily in normative or ideological terms, or when there are equally valid competing and potentially irreconcilable demands. In other words, and at the risk of tautology, parties are necessary to policy formation when partisan decisions are required. As government becomes less partisan, on the other hand, parties become less necessary.

The fourth function associated with parties is procedural in form, and concerns the recruitment of political leaders and the nomination of persons to public offices. This function can also imply that parties serve as agents of political socialisation. This was, and clearly remains, a crucial function for political parties, and as long as parties continue to structure electoral choice, even in the most minimal sense of the term, it is difficult to see this function being bypassed. To be sure, recruitment processes in contemporary parties may now involve casting a much wider net than that originally employed by the classic mass party. Rather than seeking candidates only within their own ranks, contemporary parties now seem much more ready to pull in suitable persons from institutions and organisations within the wider society, and a long record of party membership and activity is no longer seen as a *sine qua non* for preferment. Nevertheless, though the pool of talent may now stretch outside the immediate confines of the party, it is still the party which controls much of the access to public office, and in this sense this procedural function not only remains important, but could even be seen to have achieved an even greater priority than in the past.

The final function that may be indicated here is also procedural, and involves the role of parties in the organisation of parliament and government. In fact, this is potentially the most important function that parties are still required to perform. In systems of parliamentary government, the necessity for parties is self-evident. Governments in such systems need to be formed in the first place, usually through coalition negotiations; responsibilities in government then need to be allocated across different departments or ministries; and, once formed, the maintenance of these governments in office requires more or less disciplined support within parliament. None of these is likely to prove possible without the authority and organising capacities of political parties. Moreover, and even beyond conventional systems of parliamentary government, parties also appear necessary in practice for the organisation of legislative procedures, for the functioning of legislative

committees, and for day-to-day agreement on the legislative agenda (Cox & McCubbins, 1993).

Although this assessment of party functions is necessarily brief and over-generalised, it does nonetheless suggest that the representative function of parties is either declining or has been at least partially replaced by other agencies, whereas their procedural or institutional role has been maintained - indeed, this latter might even be seen to have become more prominent. Just as parties have gradually moved from society to the state (Katz & Mair, 1995), the functions that they perform and are expected to perform have changed from those of a largely *representative* agency to those of a *governing* agency. In other words, and returning to the original distinction at the beginning of this chapter, parties are now relatively less relevant in terms of the organisation and functioning of popular democracy, and hence relatively more relevant in terms of the organisation and functioning of constitutional democracy.

Taken together with the changes in party identity, these shifts in party functions clearly reinforce the sense that there has been a substantial weakening of both the partisan and the representative role of political parties and their governments. What is being left in place of this is an increasingly exclusive emphasis on the procedural role of parties as governors: the claims of parties as guarantors of good governance. This also helps to explain why the popular and constitutional pillars are not only increasingly perceived to be distinct, but also why they are growing apart in practice. When parties served as both representatives and governors, it was less easy to sense that the popular pillar functioned separately from the constitutional pillar. Precisely because they proved so important to both pillars, parties served to blur any boundaries which might have been believed to exist. As these same parties increasingly rely on their procedural role, on the other hand, the popular pillar becomes hollowed out, proving both more inchoate and more problematic. Hence also the growing belief that the weight accorded to this popular pillar now needs to be curbed. Hence also the enhanced scope for populism.

### **Two Senses of Populism**

But what sort of populism is involved here? In fact, there are at least two versions of populism which may be enhanced by the decline of party democracy. The first of these, and that which has drawn most recent attention among commentators, is populist protest - a substantive if not always coherent programme which seeks to mobilise popular support against established élites and institutions. The second version, by contrast, which is potentially more far-reaching, is populist democracy itself.

The notion of populism as protest - the substantive sense of populism - is already a familiar one across the varied literature on populism more generally (e.g., Canovan, 1981, 1999; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969), and elsewhere in this volume we see a very full reflection of the various modes in which this may be interpreted and expressed. As such, I do not intend to consider it at any length. In the context of the challenge to party democracy, it is necessary only to draw attention to the populist anti-party sentiment which can now be identified in many contemporary democracies (e.g., Poguntke & Scarrow, 1996; Norris, 1999), and to the possible link between this emerging protest and the depoliticisation of inter-party relationships. Elsewhere

(Mair, 1997: 152-4), I have suggested that this populist anti-party sentiment may be at least partly fuelled by a sense that political leaders and their parties are enjoying an increasingly privileged status at the same time as their partisan relevance is seen to be in decline. As party leaderships become increasingly remote from the wider society, and as they also appear increasingly similar to one another in ideological or policy terms, it simply becomes that much easier for populist protestors to rally against the supposed privileges of an undifferentiated political class. As party democracy weakens, therefore, the opportunities for populist protest clearly increase.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is perhaps more interesting to work with the second version of populism, focusing more on process rather than substance, and on what might be seen as an emerging populist democracy. Moreover, used in this latter sense, populism enjoys the potential for a much more pervasive spread that is currently seen in the literature. The process, or linkage, element is, of course, central to almost all definitions of populism, in that all of the discussions in the literature place significant emphasis on the nature of the relationship between a mass of followers and a leader or group of leaders. Over and above this element, however, many of these definitions also entail the more substantive element, thus applying populism only to those parties or movements that advocate a particular political demand or programme. More often than not, for example, contemporary populism, or neo-populism, is associated with the politics of the extreme right (Betz, 1994; Taggart, 1995). Almost always, as noted above, populism is assumed to involve a protest against the élites, whether from the right or from the left.<sup>4</sup>

Following a more minimal definition,<sup>5</sup> however, populism may also be seen as integral to a form of democratic governance which operates without an emphasis on party. As indicated above, the core of this minimal definition posits a relationship between voters and government that is unmediated.<sup>6</sup> In other words, and in the first place, populist democracy tends towards partyless democracy. Representation is not assured through party competition - *ex ante* and *ex fundo* (Andeweg, 1999) - and competing interests are not recognised through competing party programmes. Indeed, populist democracy in this sense assumes no fundamental clash of interests between different sectors of the electorate: voters are citizens first, and only later, if at all, are they workers, employers, farmers, women, immigrants, or whatever. The people, in this sense, are undifferentiated, and that is the second key element of the

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<sup>4</sup> Although the minimal definition used in this paper comes close to that discussed by Margaret Canovan under the heading “political populism,” her use of this latter term includes an important substantive component in that she speaks of a “tension” that “looms large” between leaders and followers (Canovan, 1981: 8-16). As used here, populist democracy does not necessarily involve any such tension.

<sup>5</sup> Both Worsley (1969) and Weyland (1999) offer very complete overviews of the variety of conceptual definitions that have been applied to populism.

<sup>6</sup> Note here the distinction elaborated by Kornhauser in his *Politics of Mass Society*: “a pluralist society supports a liberal democracy, whereas a mass society supports a populist democracy...In liberal democracy the mode of access [to power] tends to be controlled by institutional procedures and intermediate associations, whereas in populist democracy the mode of access tends to be more direct and unmediated” (quoted by Hayward, 1996: 14).

minimal definition of populism employed here. Appeals are directed to the voters at large, or to the people, and not to particular groups that are differentiated by status or belief. An absence of conflict is assumed. Whether formally organised by party or not, the government that emerges in such a democracy therefore has a duty to serve all of the people rather than just some of the people. This, then, is the third and final element of this particular sense of populism: the government serves the national interest, the popular interest, rather than any sectional interest. It serves as an administrator, seeking the best solutions available on the basis of objective criteria, thus rejecting the assumptions involved in conceptions of party democracy and party government.

Seen in these very minimal terms, this sense of populism may seem nothing novel. Even beyond the cases cited most frequently in discussions of populism, for example, and most especially in Latin America, such orientations can also be associated with Gaullism in the early years of the French Fifth Republic; or with the British Conservative Party even before the halcyon days of Margaret Thatcher; or with the long-term appeals articulated by the dominant Fianna Fáil party in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> But each of these cases may also be associated with a specific substance or programme - in this case, a form of one-nation conservatism that is explicitly developed as a partisan strategy in order to counter the appeals of what were posited to be more sectionally-based opponents. In other words, and in contrast to the more modern variety of populism espoused by new Labour in Britain, for example (see below), these orientations were always explicitly partisan. Whereas populism in the most modern variant is advanced in the context of diminishing the role of parties as such, the populism of this one-nation conservatism was advanced in order to challenge the appeal of particular parties, especially those on the left, and to enhance the appeal of others.

In fact, the familiar and highly partisan populist appeals of one-nation conservatism do not easily fall within either of the two versions of populism identified above. On the contrary, both substantive populism and populist democracy depend crucially on the erosion of party democracy. The former builds on the declining legitimacy of parties, mobilising protests against the privileges of an apparently self-serving and non-functioning political class. The latter builds more directly on the declining relevance of parties as organisations or intermediaries, and hence works with a notion that democracy can be made to work without the involvement of party. Populism as substance obviously enjoys most scope when popular *distrust* with the political class grows within the electorate, and when popular resentment can be mobilised by challenger parties or movements. Populist democracy, on the other hand, may find its most fertile ground when citizens grow more *indifferent* to democracy, and when popular attitudes are more easily characterised as reflecting both apathy and disengagement rather than distrust as such. In other words, while substantive populism can threaten established political leaders, this is not necessarily the case for populist democracy. Indeed, populist democracy may actually serve leaders' interests by offering a means of legitimating government

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<sup>7</sup> As one former leader of the latter put it - in a way that could probably just as easily have been echoed by De Gaulle, Macmillan, or even Thatcher - "representative as it is of all the people - and I mean all sections of the people - farmers, workers, businessmen and employers....Fianna Fáil is in a unique position to produce and put into effect the policies best suited to the needs of the Irish people" (Lynch, 1969: 1).

within a context of widespread depoliticisation. As I suggest below, this is certainly one plausible reading of the contemporary British case.

In this sense, populist democracy is also potentially more important than substantive populism, particularly in that it now finds the conditions in which it is more likely to be fostered. As noted above, contemporary democracies have already experienced quite a substantial erosion in the traditional mediating role played by political parties: an erosion in their role as intermediaries between citizens and the state, on the one hand, and as the key linkage mechanism between popular and constitutional democracy, on the other. Parties now manage the state. They no longer prioritise the representation of competing interests. They guarantee procedures rather than mediation. And since, under conditions of party democracy, parties were the only mediating agency between citizens and their governments within the electoral channel, their decline in this respect now suggests that this channel simply becomes that much less mediated. It is this lack of mediation which now offers the enhanced scope for populist democracy. In other words, popular democracy, when shorn of the central role played by parties, increasingly nudges towards populist democracy.

In sum, and at a very general level, populist democracy may be understood as *popular democracy without parties*. When parties play a central role in structuring collective electoral preferences and political identities, we can anticipate a vibrant and meaningful popular democracy. Moreover, and to recap the earlier discussion, when the electoral role of parties is also complemented by their also enjoying a central role in public office, we can further anticipate a blurring of the boundaries between popular democracy and constitutional democracy and hence an absence of any real tension between the two. Once the relevance of parties within the electoral channel begins to decline, however, two things follow. First, as noted above, we begin to become aware of a separation between the popular and constitutional pillars. The parties which once knitted these pillars together no longer enjoy the capacity to legitimate that linkage. Second, as the popular pillar becomes less mediated by party, popular democracy begins to take on the characteristics of populist democracy. There is a fragmentation of once powerful collective electoral identities, there is a blurring of the ideological and organisational distinctions which once defined electoral choice, and, to paraphrase Kornhauser, we see the emergence of a genuinely mass electorate whose relations with the institutions of government are no longer mediated to any significant extent.

More importantly, perhaps, it then follows that the apparent “tension” which develops between popular and constitutional democracy could well prove transient. Of course, if parties continue to be seen as representatives as well as governors, then they will almost inevitably disappoint, and the result will be tension. Moreover, as long as such tension exists, it will be open to exploitation by neo-populist actors who will point to the failure of the established alternatives to meet traditional expectations. But should the changed position of parties become a more familiar part of the landscape, and should expectations about their role adjust and come to match more closely the changed reality, then the tension is likely to evaporate. This is also what populist democracy is about, for in populist democracy, understood as a partyless popular democracy, there is no necessary tension between the two pillars. Indeed, it might even be argued that populist democracy in this sense can complement constitutional democracy.

## **The Practice of Populist Democracy: the Case of New Labour in Britain**

Consider the following - rather lengthy - extracts from the speech delivered by Tony Blair to the British Labour Party Conference in 1999: <sup>8</sup>

We know what a 21<sup>st</sup> century nation needs. A knowledge-based economy. A strong civic society. A confident place in the world....The challenge is how? The answer is people. The future is people. The liberation of human potential not just as workers but as citizens. Not power to the people but power to each person to make the most of what is within them. People are born with talent and everywhere it is in chains. Look at Britain. Great strengths. Great history. English, the language of the new technology. The national creative genius of the British people. But wasted. The country run far too long on the talents of the few, when the genius of the many lies uncared for, and ignored....Today it is people...

The old order, those forces of conservatism, for all their language about promoting the individual, and freedom and liberty, they held people back. They kept people down. They stunted people's potential...

Arrayed against us: the forces of conservatism, the cynics, the elites, the establishment...On our side, the forces of modernity and justice. Those who believe in a Britain for all the people....

To every nation a purpose. To every Party a cause. And now, at last, Party and nation joined in the same cause for the same purpose: to set our people free.

Two things are noteworthy about this rhetoric. First, it reveals the extent to which a populist language has now become acceptable within what has long been believed to be a decidedly non-populist political culture. To be sure, British political culture does remain largely inimical to the mobilisation of neo-populist parties or movements, with anti-establishment appeals from both the extreme right and the extreme left proving less successful in the British case than in almost any other west European polity. The more acceptable face of populism, on the other hand, that associated with populist democracy, is now certainly in full flow, with "the people," however defined, becoming the key reference point within New Labour rhetoric. Second, and however incongruous it may seem, this speech also indicates that even the more substantive notion of populism as protest appears to be making some headway in Britain, albeit sponsored by the very establishment against which such protest might normally be directed. This latter sense of populism is unlikely to be sustained, however, at least within the governing circles that currently espouse it. Even within New Labour, the notion of maintaining an anti-establishment rhetoric while dominating the key positions within the governing elite is eventually likely to seem implausible.

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<sup>8</sup> The full text of the speech can be found on the *Guardian* website of 30.9.1999; see: <http://www.newsunlimited.co.uk/lab99>.

It is therefore the more procedural notion of populism, that associated with populist democracy, that is the more important here. Moreover, this is not only apparent in the rhetoric which is currently adopted, which obviously could change with time. Rather, it also appears to have guided the whole governing style of New Labour in Britain, and in this sense may well be indicative of the emergence of a more generalized phenomenon. Let us look at this new style more closely.

There are two particular aspects of the New Labour political strategy that are important here. The first is the iron control which is now being exerted by the top leadership of Labour on both the party organisation on the ground and on the party in parliament. Within the party on the ground, for example, an exceptionally tight grip is now maintained on the selection and nomination of candidates for elections at both the national and sub-national level, with the recent autonomy afforded to the newly established offices in Scotland, Wales and London being accompanied by massive top-down party intervention in both candidate and leadership selection. Within Westminster itself, and despite a record and effectively invincible majority, party whips make unprecedented attempts to ensure that all Labour members remain 'on message,' and to ensure that the line pursued by the leadership is echoed throughout the parliamentary party ranks. Meanwhile the core leadership itself takes on an increasing burden of decision-making, avoiding the use of cabinet meetings and delegating to ministers the freedom to administer rather than to make key policy choices. This is a system of one party, one voice, with the words used by that voice coming only from the top.

The second aspect which is relevant here is the increased reliance on plebiscitarian techniques of winning support. Crucially, all of the key reforms instituted by this present New Labour leadership have been preceded by plebiscites - inside the party itself, where the leadership position has on occasion been endorsed by a 95 percent majority; and, at the level of the political system, in each of the regions for which devolution is proposed. Even the introduction of the direct mayoral election in London was preceded by a plebiscite, as will be any attempt to devolve a regional level of government within England.

Both strategies are in fact related, for both can be read as intending to eliminate the autonomous impact of party. The crucial actor is now the government, while the crucial legitimator is now the people writ large. In this new political strategy, it is government that still proposes, but it is now the people, rather than parliament or the parties as such, that dispose.<sup>9</sup> The link between the two is unmediated, and it is here that we see contemporary Britain entering the realm of populist democracy.

But there is more to it than this: for coupled to this developing political strategy has come also a major programme of constitutional reform. Indeed, in less than three years in office, New Labour has done more than any other British government in recent history to transform what has been an exceptionally strong tradition of majoritarian democracy. The various changes in this regard are already well-known, and together they add up to what amounts to almost a constitutional revolution: the massive process of decentralisation which has followed from the devolution of

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<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on the need for popular approval of constitutional reform is stressed particularly by Lord Irvine, the British Lord Chancellor, who coordinates the reform programme as a whole [Lecture by Lord Irvine on Britain's constitutional reform agenda, Leiden University, 22 October, 1999]. For a more lengthy assessment of the New Labour strategy, see Mair (2000).

government to Scotland and Wales; the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into British law, thus setting an immediate and important domestic constraint on parliamentary sovereignty; the adoption of proportional representation for elections to the newly devolved regional parliaments as well as in elections to the European Parliament; the establishment of a commission on electoral reform to examine possible alternatives to the plurality system for Westminster elections; the introduction of a directly elected mayor in London, with the possibility of expanding this system to other cities and regions in the future; and the abolition of voting rights for hereditary peers in the House of Lords, with the possibility that the Upper House will eventually be transformed into an elected chamber, whether directly or indirectly. In addition, New Labour has also proved sufficiently non-partisan to stretch across to other parties, inviting the Liberals to take part in a key cabinet committee on constitutional reform, and appointing senior figures from both the Liberal and Conservative parties to head official commissions on changes in policing, the electoral system, and the House of Lords. Whereas the United Kingdom originally provided the paradigmatic case for majoritarian democracy in Lijphart's (1984) well-known typology, under New Labour, and on almost every one of the features identified by Lijphart, it has now moved quite markedly in the direction of consensus democracy.

What we see here, in fact, and this is the reason why this is such an interesting case, is a unique but potentially generalisable combination of an anti-party political strategy, on the one hand, and an enhanced commitment to institutional pluralism, on the other. From one perspective, of course, the combination seems almost paradoxical. Indeed, this is precisely the view taken by David Marquand (1999: 240-241), who notes that although Tony Blair and his colleagues "have imposed a Prussian discipline on their own followers, exceeding anything attempted by any previous Labour leadership....the logic [of their constitutional reforms] is pluralistic, and the end product will be a series of checks and balances at variance with the tacit assumptions of the democratic-collectivist tradition."

From another perspective, however, the combination may seem to make a lot of sense. In other words, if we accept that the political strategy has not been developed as a means of strengthening party and partisanship, but rather as a means of taking party and partisanship out of the equation, the apparent paradox disappears. Indeed, seen in this light, both the political strategy and the constitutional strategy are wholly compatible with one another. The key point is that neither is driven by a partisan impulse. By exerting total control over its own members and representatives, the Labour leaders in government hope to be able to take the party itself for granted, thus leaving them free to reach across in an effort to incorporate other parties or elements of other parties into a loose and non-partisan governing coalition. Taking party out of the equation also makes it that much easier to think in terms of institutional pluralism and the wider territorial dispersal of power. In addition, the evasion of party and partisan interest allows consideration of electoral reform, even when this might seem to run counter to self-interest. Successful parties rarely change the rules of the game when these have already guaranteed them victory. When party itself no longer matters, however, the rules may be changed quite easily.

That New Labour should be striving for a non-partisan style of governance is hardly surprising. The rhetoric is also non-partisan: "Party and nation joined in the same

cause for the same purpose: to set our people free.” Moreover, the governing programme itself - the so-called Third Way - is also deliberately couched in non-partisan terms, being presented as a new synthesis which rises above the traditional divisions of left and right, and which can unite all sides behind an objectively validated approach to which there is no real alternative (see Giddens, 1998). As Marquand (1999: 227) notes: “Moral and ideological arguments for the Third Way are unnecessary; it does not have to be defended against alternative visions of the future, based on different moral and ideological premises. There is only one future, and resistance to it is spitting in the wind.”

In short, the paradox of Blairism is apparent only when the internal party strategy of new Labour is read as an attempt to strengthen the party, and hence as a partisan strategy. If it is read as an attempt to use leadership control in order to evade party, however, and as a non-partisan strategy, then the picture as a whole makes more sense. These are non-partisan leaders with a non-partisan programme running a non-partisan government in the interests of all the people. This is, in short, *partyless* democracy. And it is here that the story comes back to populist democracy: populism as a form of governing in which party is sidelined or disappears; in which the people are undifferentiated, and in which a non-partisan government attempts to serve the interests of all.

There are two features of this new form of populist democracy which need to be borne in mind, however. First, although I suggest that the shift towards this form of populist democracy is now most easily visible in the British case, the logic suggests that it can become much more pervasive. As the representative and partisan identities of parties in general become eroded, the appeals of populist democracy will inevitably be strengthened. Moreover, especially at the European level of government, it is likely that it is this British-style combination of populist democracy and enhanced constitutionalism that will come to hold sway. Indeed, since the only real alternative to populist democracy is party democracy, and since party democracy finds great difficulty in operating at the European level, then it seems almost inevitable that it will be the populist conception that will win through, albeit tempered, and necessarily so, by a stricter and more transparent system of institutional checks and balances.

Second, it is also therefore important to recognize from the British case that populist democracy is easily compatible with constitutional democracy. In fact, if enhanced constitutional democracy is facilitated, or even required, once party and partisanship are taken out of the equation, then it can be argued that populist democracy is also required as the means by which the practise of this partyless constitutional democracy is ultimately legitimated. Constitutional democracy sees good governance emerging from a renewed system of checks and balances, in which majorities are constrained by prior principle, on the one hand, and by the dispersal of decision-making across a variety of institutions, on the other. This is, in fact, the direction in which New Labour is currently taking the UK. But, at least as practised in the British case, there is also a strong populist component here, in that democratic accountability is also assured by the introduction of plebiscitary elements. In the absence of party, these seem almost inevitable. In this sense “the people” also have an important role as one of the final elements in the system of checks and balances.

The choice is therefore not one between populist democracy, on the one hand, and constitutionalism, on the other. Both are in fact enhanced as the hold of party is eroded. Rather, the real choice is between an emerging populist democracy and a more traditional party democracy, a choice in which the odds are increasingly stacked against the latter.

(8,171 words)

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