CHAPTER 14

Parties and their organization

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AIMS

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❖ Introduces the historical development of party organization

❖ Sketches the organization of the main parties in Britain

❖ Shows how and why the mass party is in decline

❖ Describes how this decline has changed the nature of parties and how they are regulated

❖ Examines the argument that parties are not in decline but have evolved into new kinds of 'cadre' parties.

Why parties organize

Organized political parties are a universal feature of all modern democracies – indeed, of almost all modern political systems. They have been at the centre of British politics for over two centuries, although the nature of their organization has altered greatly over that time. Parties organize because in Britain they have a central role to play in vital aspects of the system of government. If parties did not exist we would have to invent them, or invent some other way of carrying out the functions for which they are organized. Four of these functions are particularly important.

Fighting elections

Competitive elections are the single most important defining feature of democracy, and in Britain the competition is overwhelmingly between parties. As we shall see when we turn to our chapter on elections, it is now almost unknown for anyone to enter the Westminster House of Commons, or one of the new devolved assemblies, without the nomination of one of the major

parties. Styles of fighting elections are changing all the time, but they still depend heavily on party organization. At local level the party remains the key unit of organization to canvass voters, distribute propaganda material and try to persuade electors to vote on election day. At national level, which is increasingly the most important arena for election competition, parties are the dominant unit of organization: an election campaign for the Westminster Parliament or for one of the new national assemblies introduced under devolution is largely a contest between nationally organized party machines.

Raising money

Politics costs money, and fighting elections in particular can cost large amounts: for instance, in the general election of 2001 the two big parties, Labour and the Conservatives, declared combined national spending of over £23 million (Fisher 2003). Parties use all levels of their organization to raise this money: individual members contribute subscriptions or, sometimes, larger donations; local branches of parties hold numerous fund-raising

Images 14.1 and 14.2
The historical residue of the mass party

Image 14.1   A Conservative Club

Image 14.2   A former Liberal Club

⮕ The two photographs convey the physical face of the political party from the age of mass party organization, and show how anachronistic it now is. The first image is of a Conservative Club, the second of what was once a Liberal Club, both in a small northern industrial town. They incarnate the ambitions of parties with a mass membership, and when built they were among the most imposing buildings in the town centre. Notice the balcony feature on both, designed to allow triumphal party proclamations. The Conservative Club now functions solely as a drinking club; the Liberal Club has long since been turned into a theatre (the advertisement for the latest production can be seen).

Photos: Michael Moran

functions; at national level immense effort is put into cultivating rich individuals and institutions for donations. Fund-raising activities have been an important catalyst in recent years for changes in party organization, as will become clear later in this chapter.

Representing interests

There exists an elaborate network of specialized interest representation in Britain, but parties are also important in interest representation, and their organization is often shaped by this fact. The clearest instance is provided by the Labour party, which was first founded as an arm of the trade union movement, and whose internal organization, as we shall see, still bears testament to these origins.

Recruiting political leadership

The most direct way, though not the only route, to the top in British politics is via membership of a political party (see Chapter 18). Above all, parties in Britain organize to provide the most important of all group of political leaders: those who occupy governing positions, at all levels of the multi-level of system of governance in Britain. Party is key to leadership recruitment in all the assemblies we have examined so far in this book: in the Westminster Parliament, in the new devolved assemblies and in the European Parliament. And while there is some sign that the grip of party over leadership recruitment is weakening a little in the newer local government institutions (notably the new elected mayoralties), even in local government party remains the key organizational funnel through which most potential leaders have to pass. Were parties to be abolished tomorrow, we would have to find some different organizing process through which political leaders generally, and governments in particular, could be selected in Britain.

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Parties organize, then, because if they did not we would have to invent them, or invent some other means of doing what they presently do.

The historical development of party organization

Parties have deep historical roots in British politics (see Images 14.1 and 14.2). Groups claiming the label party were already exceptionally influential in the parliaments of the eighteenth century. But the modern history of party organization has been closely shaped by the developing history of the British system of government. The parties that grew out of the eighteenth-century parliament were what are commonly called *cadre* parties in their organization, meaning that they mostly consisted of a small cadre (group) of leaders at the centre. Indeed, until well into the nineteenth century parties were not much more than labels worn by factions inside Parliament: they had little internal discipline, were rarely united by any coherent political principles, and had only loose links with wider interests in the society.

That situation was transformed by changes in the size and role of the electorate in the nineteenth century. Beginning with the Great Reform Act of 1832, the size and social range of the electorate grew: before the Great Reform Act of 1832 there were just over half a million voters; by the reform of 1885, the last great extension of the nineteenth century, there were over 5.5 million. In 1832, the vote was restricted mostly to a small range of property owners. Less than a century later, in 1918, after periodic relaxations of the property requirements, it was finally opened up to all adult males and most adult women. Inevitably, parties now had to organize to represent an increasingly wide range of social and economic interests.

Mass party organization was also prompted by changes in rules governing elections. Until 1872 ballots were cast in public, and electors could thus be bribed or intimidated into voting for particular candidates. The introduction of the secret ballot in that year, especially when coupled with the increase in the size of electorate, made these weapons largely redundant. Some other way had to be found of appealing to the loyalty of large numbers of voters.

The development of the franchise throughout the nineteenth century therefore presented parties with two connected problems: how to organize an electorate that grew in size and social range; and

how to attract the votes of this electorate when the secret ballot meant that it could not could not be directly bought or coerced. Cadre parties, made up largely of factions of Westminster parliamentarians, were useless at solving these problems. The two parties that dominated British politics from the middle of the nineteenth century until the end of the First World War in 1918 – the Liberal and Conservative Parties – both shifted from being cadre to mass parties in response to this problem. The connection between party organization and the new electorate is shown by the fact that the great spurt in party organization in the country at large happened soon after the passage of the 1867 Reform Act, the first piece of reform that not only expanded the electorate greatly but, for the first time, gave votes to sizeable numbers of manual workers.

Although there were differences in the organization of the Conservative and Liberal parties, they shared important features:

● They both aimed to recruit a mass membership.
● In order to provide an incentive to members to join, they established bodies which claimed to give members a say in how the party was run, and in particular a say in the policies which the party put before electorates.
● They formed local organizations based on Westminster parliamentary constituencies, since the most important function of the new mass membership was to help convince electors to identify with the party, and then turn out to vote for it on election day.
● As a further incentive to local organization they gave these local parliamentary associations a big say – in many cases the dominant say – over who would be selected as the party's parliamentary candidate, and thus gave an early say in leadership selection to local activists.
● They used mass organization to raise money, both by direct subscriptions and by encouraging local party activists to raise funds.

By the end of the nineteenth century a model of party organization that lasted through much of the twentieth century was thus already established. The rise of the Labour party, which displaced the Liberal party as the main opponent of the Conservatives after the First World War, gave the mass party an extra dimension. Because the Conservatives had first existed as a parliamentary faction, and then only created a mass party to solve the problems this faction faced in managing the new mass electorate, the party organization in the country had always been subordinate to the parliamentary leadership. But the Labour party was mostly created outside Parliament, and already had a fully-fledged national party structure with its own constitution and conference before Labour became a significant parliamentary force. Labour developed a theory of party organization which, on some readings, gave the party in the country, and notably its annual party conference, the dominant voice in deciding party policy. At the party conference all the extra-parliamentary interests in the party were represented: notably, the trade unions and the individual members organized into constituency Labour parties. Just how far this theory can be made to work, as we will see, has been a long-term problem for the Labour party.

The rise of Labour ushered in the age of the mass party, an age that lasted over half-a-century. The mass party flourished in a period when leaders had to reach millions of electors, and when the only direct means of doing this was through personal contact. Election campaigns turned on contacting voters personally, and addressing as many as possible in public meetings and by canvassing. All this demanded masses of volunteers. But the rise first of radio, and then (in the 1950s) the increasing importance of television in contacting voters, changed styles of campaigning and made the mass party progressively less important. Leaders now began to appeal directly to voters through news and current affairs broadcasts. The mass meeting and direct canvassing of voters became just a subsidiary instrument: a means of providing 'sound bites' for radio and television. By the 1990s the mass party had even ceased to be important in reaching individual voters. Parties could do the job by centrally organized telephone canvassing; they could gauge public opinion by increasingly sophisticated polling methods; and they could try to persuade electors by expensive advertising campaigns. These develop-

Figure 14.1   From giants to pygmies: the declining membership of the Conservative and Labour parties
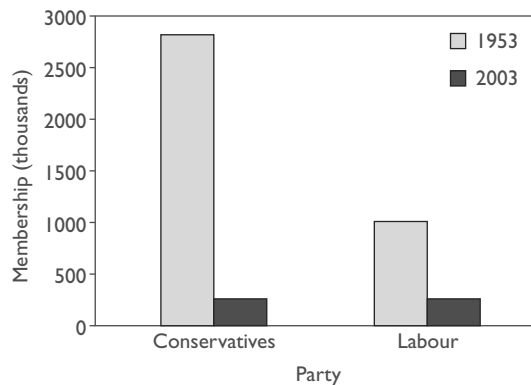
Sources: Figures for 1953 from Butler and Butler (2000: 141, 158); 2003 figures are estimates from party sources.

➲ Estimating the individual membership of parties is an inexact art, so the numbers on which this figure is based are approximations. But the orders of magnitude are not disputed. In the early 1950s both main parties had huge individual memberships: that is, real people who paid their own subscriptions for membership. The Conservatives also had more than double the individual membership of the Labour party. By the start of the twenty-first century both parties probably had about the same number of members – around 250,000 each – but the Conservatives were probably in a weaker condition because they had an older membership.

ments help explain a feature we noticed in Chapter 13: the fact that since the 1950s the total membership of parties has fallen by well over two million (see Figure 14.1).

This does not mean that party organization, especially party organization outside Parliament, has become irrelevant; on the contrary, as we shall shortly see, all the major parties have been making increasing efforts to involve their members more closely in party government, especially in leadership selection. Parties have not viewed the decline in their membership with indifference: both Labour and the Conservatives have launched periodic campaigns in the last decade to recruit new members. Leaders worry about the health of the mass party because, for all the changes that have occurred in campaigning styles, the party still carries out important functions. Thus while local campaigning by party members is now only marginal to results, these margins can decide elections: in the 2001 general election ten seats were won by a margin of fewer than 400 votes. Constituency parties also still have a dominant say in selecting candidates for parliamentary elections (and both below and above that, party members have a large say in selecting council candidates, and candidates for European constituencies). Party leaders worry that if they do not have a large and local active membership it would be easy for the selection process to be controlled by a small faction. And for all the changes that have come over the mass party, one factor that was critical to its birth remains as vital as ever: money. The new styles of campaigning, though no longer as demanding of people power, are even more financially demanding.

We will see when considering the individual parties themselves that their organization reflects the legacies and problems of the age of the mass party.

The Conservative party: organization and power

The Conservative party, we saw above, originated as a Parliamentary faction, and only created itself as a mass organized party to cope with the demands of fighting elections under the secret ballot and expanded suffrage in the nineteenth century. This gave the organization of the party a distinctive character. Above all, it ensured that the party in Parliament, and especially the parliamentary leadership, was the dominant component. But this by no means consigned the rest of the party to insignificance. Above all, the parliamentary party's control was limited by the decentralized structure of the wider party. The party in the constituency – the Constituency Association – was the key unit of organization in the mass party. It was impossible to join a national Conservative party because the Conservative party nationally was just an assembly of these different constituency organizations.

The importance of this mass organization was heightened by the fact that it was very successful. The Conservatives were easily the best organized

mass political movement in twentieth-century Britain. There were around 250,000 Young Conservatives in the golden years of the early 1950s; it is possible that there are now only 5,000 of their contemporary equivalents. These figures are approximate for a reason that is itself revealing: the party has always been haphazard about recording and retaining its members. Historically, this reflected the fact that party organization in the country was as much social as political. The vitality and numbers derived in part from the fact that the party was an important institution in middle-class social life, but this integration between party organization and middle-class culture made the mass party even more significant.

The decentralized nature, and the social character of the party in the country, provided the clues to how party organization in practice functioned – better clues than lie in any formal organization chart. For instance, formally the party outside Parliament had no more than an advisory role in making policy. Thus the event called colloquially the Conservative Annual Conference was actually just an Assembly of the separate autonomous constituency associations with only an advisory role on policy. In practice, relations of influence in the party were more subtle than this simple organization model suggested. Decentralization into highly autonomous constituencies put several powerful cards into the hands of local constituency activists. It gave them a very high level of control over the selection of parliamentary candidates and therefore, in safe seats, control over who would be returned as Conservative MPs. It gave them a large say over finance in the party, since the party's wealth – which was great – depended heavily on the funds raised by the constituencies. When the party had a mass of members these constituencies were formidable fund-raising machines. And in part because of their role in parliamentary candidate selection, local associations had a direct, if informal, line of communication with the Parliamentary leadership on matters of policy and political strategy.

These generalizations are in the past tense because the Conservative party is in a period of great change. The forces prompting change include a catastrophic fall in constituency membership; the huge defeats suffered by the Conservatives in the general elections of 1997 and 2001; and the question mark placed over Conservative party organization in Wales and Scotland by dismal results for elections to the Westminster Parliament and the development of the distinct patterns of devolved politics following the devolution reforms in those two countries. Eighteen years in government (1979–97) had led to neglect of party organization. The election of William Hague as party leader in 1997 following the party's landslide defeat at the hands of Labour provided the occasion for institutional reform. Plainly influenced by the example of Labour party leaders from Kinnock to Blair in reshaping their party institutions, Hague quickly produced a series of proposals for reform. These reforms (see Briefing 14.1 for details) showed the impact of a new creed of managerialism in the party. (Hague's one proper job outside politics had been a spell as a management consultant with the world's leading management consultancy, McKinsey.) An attempt was made to trim the size of some of the more unwieldy old institutions, such as the Executive Council, which had a theoretical membership of nearly 1,000! A Management Board was established with the object of unifying what had been formerly two separate institutions, the party organization controlled by the Leader and the National Union of Constituency Associations in the country at large. An attempt was made to spell out clear lines of responsibility between the components of the party. In short, an attempt was made to replace the decentralized, rather ramshackle structure that had grown up since the nineteenth century.

Perhaps even more significant than the institutional changes themselves was the manner of their introduction. In an echo of a tactic used by Tony Blair when he became leader of the Labour party, Hague organized a plebiscite of party members through a postal ballot to give a verdict on his proposals. (They were overwhelmingly endorsed.) This attempt to draw in the wider membership was also reflected in the new rules for selecting the Leader which Hague also introduced in 1998. As Timeline 14.1 shows, this continues a long-established widening of the group entitled to a say in choice of party leader.

Briefing

THE CRISIS OF CONSERVATIVE PARTY ORGANIZATION

Although the Conservative party historically had a reputation of being a tightly controlled hierarchy, it was anything but. Indeed it was a highly fragmented institution in which local constituency associations had great autonomy, and the representative bodies were often huge and chaotically run. This worked fairly well when the culture of the party was deferential, the parliamentary elite was left to get on with its job, and the so-called Annual Conference could be used as a big social occasion and for propaganda purposes. But in the 1980s and 1990s membership declined catastrophically, and at the same time activists began to demand a greater say in policy making. The 'Hague reforms' of 1998 were partly modelled on reforms already made in the Labour party, and partly reflected Mr Hague's experiences as a management consultant. They established:

- *A Board* to meet monthly, charged with overall responsibility for all aspects of party management beyond the parliamentary party in Westminster
- *A National Convention* to meet twice yearly, mostly with the job of channelling grassroots views to the Leader
- *A National Convention Executive*, a small body with executive responsibilities, reporting to the Board
- *Policy Forums*, an idea copied directly from Labour. These are networks of ordinary members, to be consulted on policy documents and issues. This is an attempt to damp down the increasingly difficult-to-manage Annual Conference.

Sources: Information from Kelly (1999 and 2001).

➲ The organization of the party is in crisis: membership is falling catastrophically, and settled agreements about the division of responsibilities between the parliamentary leadership and the rank-and-file membership are under challenge. The changes summarized above are an attempt to move from the informal, often chaotic, structures of the past to a more formally organized institution.

These reforms in part 'empower' the party in the country more formally than in the past, but they also attempt to organize it on more centralized lines. This has made the position and organization of Central Office, the party's central headquarters, more prominent and contentious. ('Central Office' is forever associated with the party's historic, imposing headquarters in Smith Square, just round the corner from the Palace of Westminster. In a sign of the fallen fortunes of the party, its headquarters are now housed in offices over a Starbucks in Victoria Street. I retain the traditional usage here.) Central Office, like any bureaucracy, has its own distinctive culture, interests and feuds, but the most distinctive feature of the national organization is the extent to which it is put at the disposal of whoever happens to be leader of the party at any particular moment. The leader has the power of hiring and firing, and while this obviously cannot be

done capriciously, in practice the leader does have a large say over key personnel appointments. Perhaps the single most important organizational appointment made by the leader is that of chairman of the party, for the chairman can be, and in recent cases almost always has been, the main 'manager' of the party on the leader's behalf. As a result appointment of, and dismissal of, the Party Chairman has often been a public signal of internal power struggles in the party.

The role of Central Office, and its relationship with the parliamentary leadership of the party, depends heavily on whether the party is in government or opposition. Not surprisingly, when the party was in its long occupation of government from 1979 to 1997 it was more marginal, rising to prominence at key moments such as general elections. But the Central Office machine nevertheless has key enduring functions in the party regardless of

TIMELINE 14.1   THE EVOLUTION OF CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP SELECTION METHODS

1922–65

Conservative leader 'emerged' by a secret, informal process of consultation involving leading Conservatives, mostly in the House of Commons. In this period every change of Conservative Leader took place while the party held office and a name was forwarded by the party leadership to the monarch of a figure who was to be invited to invited to form a government.

1965

Leader to be elected by secret ballot of all Conservative MPs. Failure to produce majority winner (50 per cent of all votes cast and margin of 15 per cent over second candidate) leads to second ballot; if still no clear winner, 'run off' between the two top candidates. Leaders elected under this method were Edward Heath (1965–75), Margaret Thatcher (1975–90); John Major (1990–97); William Hague, (1997–2001). All but John Major were elected while the party was in opposition.

1975

Provision for annual re-election introduced, allowing leader to be challenged. Procedure invoked by Margaret Thatcher in her successful challenge to Edward Heath, 1975; by Sir Anthony Meyer against Margaret Thatcher, unsuccessfully, in 1989; and by Michael Heseltine in November 1990, leading to Mrs Thatcher's displacement, but by John Major, not Mr Heseltine.

1998

William Hague introduces new rules with two provisions:

- Annual re-election rule abolished. Provision for (maximum of one) no-confidence vote per year, to be triggered by call for ballot of Conservative MPs supported by at least 15 per cent of MPs. Passage of no-confidence vote triggers leadership election.
- Leadership election in two stages: if more than two candidates, MPs vote to eliminate all but top two, bottom candidate being eliminated in each successive round. Remaining two candidates contest for simple majority of all members of the Conservative party in the country.

2001

Iain Duncan Smith elected Conservative Leader by this method in 2001, following resignation of William Hague after general election defeat.

2003

Michael Howard 'crowned' as Leader, 2003: Conservative MPs agree among themselves on a single candidate, and the wider Party electorate is left merely to endorse their choice.

2005

Howard annonces that he will stand down after a gap allowing reconsideration of election method.

➲ The history of Conservative leadership election methods since the mid-1960s is essentially one of 'broadening the franchise', to the present point where the critical choice is formally in the hands of rank and file Conservatives in the country. The significance of starting the timeline at 1922 is the following: while before then the 'emergence' of leaders after informal consultation took place, 1922 marks the date of the beginning of formal organization by all Conservative backbench Members of Parliament. (For the history of the 1922 Committee, see text.) But, as the 'crowning' of Michael Howard in 2003 shows, the wider membership can still be deprived of the opportunity to make a choice.

whether the Conservatives are in office or opposition. It is the backbone of the machine at the leader's disposal for fighting elections. It controls an important gateway to Parliament, because eligibility for selection as a Conservative parliamentary candidate depends on being on the Central Office-approved list of candidates. It is the main machine by which the party seeks to raise funds, either from the constituency parties at large in the country, from the donations of companies or from wealthy individuals. Above all, the Central Office machine is an important means by which the leader attempts to manage the wider party in the country.

This brief summary highlights one overwhelmingly important contingency: the biggest single influence on the practical working of Conservative party organization is whether the party is in opposition or government, and this contingency makes the role of the parliamentary party uniquely sensitive, if only because, as we saw earlier, the party began as a

parliamentary group which created its own mass organization.

The whole group of Conservative MPs is commonly called 'the 1922 Committee', after a famous meeting in 1922 when a meeting of all Conservative MPs led to the fall of a government. The 1922 meets weekly when Parliament is in session, and has itself a network of special committees covering some of the most important responsibilities of government. But its most important mechanisms of influence and control are informal. The number of Conservative MPs is never large: even after the great Conservative landslides of the 1980s there were fewer than 400, and after the 2001 general election there were only 166. MPs mix in the enclosed, intense social world of the Westminster Parliament that was described in Chapter 10. The most important mechanisms of control and influence are therefore informal. The 1922 Committee has its own elected officers, the most important of whom is its Chairman. The chairman shoulders important responsibilities, mostly exercised informally: in particular, informing the leader about the sentiments of backbenchers, and especially warning the leader of dissatisfaction on the backbenches. In extreme cases the chairman and officers of the 1922 Committee may have the responsibility of telling leaders that support is so low that they should step aside. This last role has led to the development of a great legend about the role of the 'men in suits', the 1922 Committee, in quietly telling leaders to step aside (the political equivalent of inviting a disgraced fellow officer to retire to some quiet corner with a loaded revolver). In practice leaders are so attached to office that they rarely take these gentlemanly hints: in the last 30 years Conservative leaders have only been removed after bruising public leadership contests (Heath in 1975, Thatcher in 1990, Duncan Smith in 2003) or have resigned after leading the party to electoral disaster (Major in 1997, Hague in 2001, Howard in 2005).

One reason changes of leadership in the party are so bloody is that traditionally Conservatives have given unusual authority to the leader – in formal terms, probably more authority than in any other democratic party in Britain. As we shall see when we turn in Chapter 18 to leadership recruitment, this formal authority has been strengthened by the leaders' prominence in the wider struggle for political leadership in Britain. This makes the changes in recent years in the method of selecting the leader all the more important. Until the middle of the 1960s the leader of the party just 'emerged': when a new leader was needed some senior older figures in Parliament informally canvassed MPs, giving special weight to the leading MPs. That secretive process, which dated from pre-democratic days, became increasingly anachronistic in a democratic political system. From the mid-1960s to 1998 the Conservatives worked with the same system, subjecting it to only minor modifications. This system essentially allowed the 1922 Committee to select the leader. In the 1990s the Conservatives' main opponents, the Labour party, gradually widened their own 'franchise' for electing the leader to give a more direct say to individual members, as we shall see below. After William Hague's election in 1997 he moved rapidly to do the same (see Timeline 14.1 for details). In 2003 the party, exhausted by bitter factional battles during the brief leadership of Iain Duncan Smith (2001–3), arranged a 'coronation' in which Michael Howard emerged as the sole candidate for the leadership after negotiations within the parliamentary leadership. When Mr Howard announced his impending resignation following the 2005 general election this also offered the chance to reconsider the scale of franchise.

The Labour party: organization and power

By contrast with the Conservatives, the Labour party first emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century as a mass organized movement in the country before Labour became a serious parliamentary force. The formal establishment of the modern party, in 1918, in fact coincided with the emergence of Labour as the Conservatives' main opponents in the general election of the same year. The Constitution on which the party settled in that year created Labour not as a single entity, but as a federation of 'affiliated' organizations. Affiliation meant

that organizations such as trade unions and individual constituency parties subscribed financially to the party, and enjoyed voting rights in the party's key national institutions in rough proportion to the size of their subscriptions. Thus Labour developed as a mass party organization before it emerged as a great parliamentary force, and the voting power of the components of this organization was heavily influenced by financial 'muscle' in the party. These historically inherited institutional features explain the key tension in the organization of the party, a tension that has periodically threatened to pull it completely apart: the tension between a Party that is a federation of organizations in the country at large, and a parliamentary leadership that is concerned with winning majorities in Parliament and with governing when in office.

Like the Conservatives, therefore, Labour was for much of its history a truly mass party, and the history of this mass character in part mirrored the history of Conservative development. 'Individual' membership of the party has generally been equated with membership in the individual constituency Labour parties. These levels of membership never matched those achieved by the Conservatives, but they have shown a similar pattern of decline: they peaked at just one million in 1952, and their recorded levels by the close of the twentieth century were below 400,000, though the true figure may now may be as low as 250,000. The only departure from this pattern occurred in the aftermath of Tony Blair's election as leader, when a national recruitment campaign produced a short-lived influx of new members.

The most impressive nominal measure of mass membership historically was provided by the affiliation figures for the most important institutional component of the party, the trade unions. At its height at the end of the 1970s trade union affiliation to the party was measured as the equivalent of over 6.5 million members. But this was an institutional fiction, produced by a financial mechanism. The figures did not represent real people who had made a decision to link with the Labour party. Unions created their own separate political funds, from a small additional levy added to the individual subscription of each union member. After 1946

union members had to 'opt out' of paying this levy and, since the amount is trivial, few did so. The fund could be used for a variety of purposes, but for unions affiliated to the Labour party it funded the union's affiliation. The size of the subscription paid by the individual union decided the nominal number of members it had affiliated. This financial mechanism put the unions at the centre of party organization for two reasons: historically, it made them the main sources of party finance; and since the size of affiliation fees converted into the size of the vote which a union could cast in key party bodies, it often gave them a predominant voice in any forum where decisions were made by vote. Of these, the most important, and most contentious, was the Annual Conference.

The power of the Annual Conference of the party was historically contested, because in the way that power was exercised was the key to how Labour solved the tensions inherent in its organization: the tensions in a federated party where one element, the unions, provided most of the money and commanded most of the votes at Conference; and other tensions, cutting across these, between the mass organization outside Parliament and the parliamentary leadership created by the rise of Labour as the Conservatives' main rival. Some official accounts pictured Conference as the 'Parliament of the movement', implying that it had supreme decision-making power. But this created two kinds of problem: where the use of the union 'block vote' carried decisions that overrode the votes of individual members from the constituencies; and where conference decisions opposed the policies of the parliamentary leadership – which claimed, by virtue of fighting democratic parliamentary elections, to represent a different, (and wider) constituency in the country at large (see Briefing 14.2).

Throughout much of the party's history after 1918 these tensions were contained by a variety of means. In part they were suppressed when the party was in government, because the parliamentary leadership then had especially strong grounds for either calling on the loyalty of the mass party, or ignoring its views. The parliamentary leadership was also able, for much of its history, to create alliances with parts of the trade union leadership, thus using part

Briefing

THE BLOCK VOTE AND THE FEDERAL NATURE OF THE LABOUR PARTY

The 'block vote' is a direct outcome of the Labour party's federal structure and has been wielded by all affiliated organizations. But historically it mattered most in the case of union votes because unions had by far the largest voting 'blocks'.

The 'block' originates in the case of unions from the mechanism of affiliation. All unions are permitted to establish a separate 'political fund' which is financed by a small levy on individual members. To avoid paying the levy members must 'contract out'. Few do so, and few are even aware that they are paying this supplement. This fund can be used for many political purposes. Some unions (for example, the Association of University Teachers) have a political fund, but are not affiliated to the Labour party. At the time of writing 22 unions are affiliated to Labour, including some of the largest, such as the Transport and General Workers Union. They pay affiliation fees from the Political Fund (at the time of writing, £2.50 per member). Some members 'affiliate' up to their whole membership; some up to the proportion of members who pay the political levy, or less. Thus the affiliation is not connected to the choices of real individual members. Each 'affilation' carries one vote in, for example, voting at the Annual Conference: thus a union that pays (at current rates) £2.5 million annually is 'buying' one million votes. With individual membership at less than 250,000, this gives big unions a potentially dominant voice in votes. But a number of features moderate the impact of the union block vote:

- Even at the height of union influence in the party, the split between unions and other affiliated organizations at the Annual Conference was only 70:30
- Unions even at the height of their power were divided and often 'cancelled out' the block vote of each other
- Since reforms introduced in 1993 unions have been obliged to divide their 'block' vote at conference between each individual union delegate, who votes separately. In practice, though, most unions will vote together
- In the electoral college for choosing the Leader of the party unions are obliged to ballot their members, and to cast their 'block' in proportion to the choices made by the individual members.

⮕ The 'block vote' has commonly been pictured by opponents of the Labour party as an undemocratic mechanism. Whether undemocratic or otherwise, it arises out of a consistent, and historically deep rooted, theory of party government.

of the union block voting power to carry its own views. These mechanisms broke down at the end of the 1970s when the party lost office to the Conservatives after a difficult spell in government, 1974–9. The years in office strained relations between the unions, the parliamentary leadership and many constituency parties to breaking point. Something close to civil war broke out in the party. The 1980s were a decade of struggle, both about the content of policy and about the focus of authority in the party. The struggle resulted in two major changes to party organization: in the structure of party policy making; and in the method of leadership selection.

The main change in the organization of policy making was first introduced in 1990. It was an attempt to 'dethrone' the Annual Conference, the formerly sovereign policy-making body whose role in reality for decades had proved a source of contention. Below Conference was established a series of 'policy forums' where larger numbers of individual party members could simply turn up and contribute to debates about policy. This was strengthened by reforms introduced in 1997, with the creation of a National Policy Forum with 175 members, hearing and considering reports from eight separate policy commissions. The whole process is in effect a rolling policy review, with the

TIMELINE 14.2   THE EVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP SELECTION IN THE LABOUR PARTY

1922–81
'Leader' means leader of the Parliamentary Labour party, elected at the beginning of each parliamentary session. In the rare contested elections, the winner was the candidate gaining an absolute majority of votes (if necessary through a second ballot of the best two supported candidates). First leader elected by this method was J. Ramsay Macdonald, 1922; last, Michael Foot, 1980.

1981–93
1981 special conference decides the Leader (and Deputy Leader) will be re-elected each year by Annual Conference. Conference to form an electoral college,

with 40 per cent of votes allocated to unions, 30 per cent to Parliamentary Party, and 30 per cent to constituencies. Neil Kinnock (1983) and John Smith (1992) elected by this method.

1993
Party Conference changes balance of votes in electoral college to equal (one-third each) for union, parliamentary party and constituencies; and unions and constituency parties obliged to ballot individual members on their choices, and divide their votes according to the expressed preferences of their members. Tony Blair (1994) elected under this method.

➲ For most of the twentieth century both big parties gave control over leadership choice to their parliamentary representatives. Labour was the first to share control with the Party outside Parliament, but it took some years before the party gave individual members a direct vote in leadership selection.

object of considering the full range of policy over the lifetime of a single Parliament. The National Policy Forum in turn commends policies to the Annual Conference, which is thus often faced with a 'take it or leave it' choice.

The second major organizational change produced by Labour's internal turmoil in the 1980s was a transformation of the party's method of selecting its leader. The details of the development of Labour leadership selection methods are given in Timeline 14.2, but the direction of development can be simply summarized: for over 60 years following the rise of Labour as one of the two main parties the parliamentary party entirely controlled leadership selection; but since the early 1980s it has had to share control over the choice with individual rank-and-file members and with the trade unions.

We can sum up the recent development of Labour party organization as follows. Imagine someone who fell asleep at a Labour party meeting in 1979 (all too easy to do) and suddenly woke up 25 years later. Our character would soon notice three big changes in the way the party is run that have affected the historical building blocks of Labour party organization.

The parliamentary party

This has simultaneously become more influential but less independent. Institutional changes in the way party policy is formulated have allowed the parliamentary leadership increasingly to control policy debates. The party Conference is stage-managed by the parliamentary leadership: it has become a kind of annual assembly organized for publicity purposes, with carefully choreographed leadership speeches and announcements of new policy initiatives geared to provide sound bites for broadcasting. It is hard to know how enduring this ascendancy will be, because it largely dates from the 1990s. In other words, it dates from the period when all the major components of the party decided to sink their public differences in the attempt to get back into office after the long years of Conservative ascendancy; and since 1997 it coincides with Labour's occupation of government, a condition that has always helped the ascendancy of the parliamentary leadership. But it has been buttressed by longer-term changes which have, for instance, increased the control of the leader of the party over the party's own central administrative machinery.

The parliamentary Labour party's autonomy has, however, been diminished by two long-term changes. Even at the end of the 1970s Labour MPs in safe seats virtually had a job for life, or for as long as they wished to stay in Parliament. Since then, re-selection as the party's candidate has become far from automatic, and the spread of 'one member, one vote' in candidate selection has opened up the process of candidate selection to many more individual party members in the constituencies. The numbers of 'deselected' MPs are not great, but a few examples help make all sitting MPs sensitive to this possibility and therefore careful to cultivate their local parties. The second long-term change we have already described: the parliamentary party has lost its monopoly over the choice of party leader.

The trade unions

The unions' influence has declined. It is true that the electoral college mechanism for selecting the leader has given unions a secure place in selection, but in other respects organizational changes – not to mention the drift of policy itself – have left them increasingly marginalized. But this shift in organizational arrangements has only magnified the tensions at the heart of Labour's federated party structure. As institutional changes have made the block vote less effective, and the content of policy in government has often drifted completely out of control of the unions, voices have increasingly been questioning the point of continuing as major paymasters of the party. The party relies less on the unions for funding than it did a couple of decades ago; but the unions also get less for their money than they did a couple of decades ago (see Table 14.1 for more information on funding).

The territorial organization

The most important aspect of this is obviously the organization in the constituencies, which has become increasingly divided along national lines. One of the most important forces causing this is the devolution measures passed by the government after 1997. The existence of new governing institutions in Wales and Scotland, and the need to fight

Table 14.1 Money in the parties: the influence of the election cycle

	2002	2001
Labour's total income	£21.2 million	£35.5 million
Labour's income from donations	£4.6 million	£16.0 million
Conservatives' total income	£9.9 million	£23.2 million
Conservatives' income from donations	£5.7 million	£17.7 million

Source: Calculated from electoralcommission.org.uk

Note: The figures are only comparable for approximate orders of magnitude. The Labour figure for 2002 is for the whole of the calendar year; the Conservatives' for the last nine months; Labour's 2001 figure is for the calendar year; the Conservatives' for the calendar year beginning 1 April 2001.

➲ The most important features of these figures are not the monetary differences between the parties, which can be affected by a variety of reporting conventions, but the way income jumps in the year of a general election, and the extent to which both parties rely on donations to stock their 'war chests'.

separate elections to control those governing institutions, created quite distinct institutional forces in those two countries, and has led to the increasingly separate organization of the party in the separate countries of the UK.

Challenging two-party dominance: alternative models of party organization

'Third parties' used to be virtually a residual category in discussion of the British party system because the Labour and Conservative parties were so overwhelmingly important, but we have already seen that this is now far from the case. In the devolved governments 'third parties' are often no longer in third place: in Scotland the Liberal Democrats have been in coalition with Labour since 1999, and the Nationalists have been the largest opposition party; in Wales Plaid Cymru is the largest opposition party. As we will see in

Chapter 17, in elections to the Westminster Parliament the domination of Labour and Conservative has been in long-term decline (see People in Politics 14.1).

These third parties vary in electoral significance, but that significance is often great and is almost universally growing. The Nationalists and the Liberal Democrats by now have established a secure hold within elected national assemblies and, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, in governing

People in politics

14.1   PARTY LEADERS BEYOND THE 'MAGIC CIRCLE' OF LABOUR AND THE CONSERVATIVES

Cartoons: Shaun Steele

Alex Salmond (1954–), MP for Banff and Buchan in the Westminster Parliament, 1987–; educated St Andrews University; civil servant, economist with Royal Bank of Scotland, 1980–87. Convener (leader) of Scottish National Party, 1990–2000. Resigned as Leader in 2000, but following the fall of John Swinney (see Political Issues 14.1) stood again for the leadership and was elected in September 2004 with a huge majority of the vote of members.

Gwynfor Evans (1912–), educated University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and St John's College Oxford. President Plaid Cymru, 1945–81, Honorary President, 1982–; MP, Carmarthen, 1966–70 (returned as first ever Plaid Cymru Westminster member) and 1974–9. He became in old age a fully integrated member of the Welsh political establishment, but was a key figure as an outsider in creating the uniquely 'cultural' character of Welsh nationalism.

Charles Kennedy (1959–), educated University of Glasgow; 1983–97, MP for Ross; Skye and Inverness West, 1997–. First elected as Social Democrat MP, 1983; switched to Liberal Democrats on merger of Liberals and SDP, 1988. Succeeded Paddy Ashdown as Liberal leader, 1999. Had he opted for the Conservative or Labour parties he could have expected only a slow route to the top; the smaller world of Liberal Democratic politics catapulted him in youth into national prominence.

⮕   The rise of third parties created some political careers that would have been difficult in the two major parties. Two of these figures are pioneers: Salmond's success cast a long shadow over his successor, John Swinney, who resigned in 2004; Gwynfor Evans, a cultural nationalist and pacifist, is the dominant figure in modern Welsh national-ism. Charles Kennedy was elected to the Westminster Parliament almost on graduation from University, and the Liberal Democrats skipped a political generation in electing him Leader in 1999. His career suggests a risky, but potentially rewarding, strategy for any ambitious young politician: join a small party on the brink of a surge of support.

institutions. Others, such as the Greens, have made periodic though unsustained breakthroughs at national level, but have a more permanent presence in local government. We shall see in the next chapter that these parties are highly varied in their ideologies but, as regards organization, they show important common features which amount to a departure from the historically engrained nature of the two dominant parties. The two dominant parties have been deeply marked by their Westminster Parliamentary histories – by the fact that since 1918 in the case of Labour, and for much longer in the case of the Conservatives, they have been focused on the Westminster battle, and the battle in particular to occupy (and, when occupying, to keep) office in the Westminster system. The history of, and forces shaping, organization in the other parties have been very different, and this is what makes them important as alternative models of party organization. These third parties have either had to create themselves as extra Westminster parliamentary forces or, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, to recreate themselves as such.

The Liberal Democrats are the modern result of a fusion between two political forces of unequal weight and with different organizational histories. The party was created in 1988 when the Liberal Party fused with the Social Democratic Party (SDP). (The original name, Social and Liberal Democrats, was changed to the Liberal Democrats a year later.) The SDP was originally the creation of a Westminster parliamentary faction. It was born in 1981 when four leading members of the Labour party announced the formation of a new party in reaction to what they alleged was the capture of Labour by militant socialism. The Social Democrats rapidly attracted a large electoral following, and a large membership. Between 1981 and 1987 they fought elections as part of an Alliance with the Liberal party (see below). This produced disappointing results, notably in the 1987 general election, as the rapidly acquired SDP electoral support and membership melted away almost as rapidly. The disappointment of 1987 was followed by a proposal from the Liberals for merger (a takeover in all but name). After some infighting this

was accomplished, as we saw above, in 1988. The SDP brought little institutional originality to the marriage, because it was part of the old Westminster world: it was the product of a disappointed faction within the Labour Westminster parliamentary leadership. The Liberals, by contrast, had a considerably more innovative institutional history.

The Liberals were one of the two dominant parties in the United Kingdom until 1918, when they were supplanted by Labour. By the 1950s they had shrunk to parliamentary insignificance. The lowest point came in the general election of 1951, when the Party returned only six Westminster MPs with 2.5 per cent of the popular vote; and then again in the 1970 general election it returned six members. Since then, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 17, the decline of Labour and the Conservatives as electoral forces has been accompanied by the revival of the Liberal Democrats, especially in the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments. This long, half-century road to revival has largely depended on extra-parliamentary organization, and this has been reflected in the structure of party policy making and leadership selection. On the latter the Liberal Democrats pioneered leadership selection through one member, one vote, and still remain distinct in this way from Labour and Conservatives: from the former in not operating an electoral college which gives votes to constituent organizations; from the latter in not using the election in the parliamentary party as a 'filter' to select candidates to put before the membership. On methods of internal policy making the party has been similarly pioneering. For instance, while devolution has in effect forced Labour and Conservatives to develop a federal party structure to reflect the new devolved governments, the Liberals historically operated as a federation of the separate national parties. But the amalgamation with the Social Democrats reinforced UK-wide organization, making the UK-wide annual assembly, for example, the sovereign policy-making body in the party.

Organizationally, then, the Liberal Democrats represent the fusion of two very different traditions of party organization: that of a centralizing parlia-

mentary cadre (the original Social Democrats) and that of a party recreated from the ground up after being virtually wiped out as a parliamentary force. But parliamentary organization has probably strengthened in recent years, because parliamentary representation has become stronger. As we saw in Chapter 11, the Liberal Democrats are now a major (indeed a governing) force in the Scottish Parliament, and also in the Welsh Assembly. There has been a also been a sharp rise in Westminster parliamentary representation in general elections since 1997: 46 MPs were returned to the Westminster Parliament in that year 52 in 2001; and 62 in 2005.

The importance of extra-parliamentary organization is even stronger in the case of Nationalists (for more on Nationalism in general, and Scottish Nationalists in particular, see Political Issues 14.1). Indeed, as we also saw in Chapter 11 on devolved government, the origins of the nationalist parties are very far removed from parliamentary politics, still less from the particular politics of Westminster: in the case of Plaid Cymru the origins lie, for example, in a movement to defend the language and the traditional culture which it supports. Some, admittedly minor, elements in nationalism have even flirted with overt anti-parliamentarianism, of the sort brought to full, violent development by parts of the Republican movement in Northern Ireland. The founding figures of these nationalist parties have no Westminster parliamentary pedigree, and for virtually the whole of their history their Westminster parliamentary wings have been tiny factions, nominally there to agitate for the separation of their country from the United Kingdom. The extra-parliamentary weight of the parties has been reflected in both their formal structures and in their modes of leadership selection. Whereas the two big parties, Labour and the Conservatives, have in recent years had to adapt to allow their extra-parliamentary wings a bigger say, the newly successful nationalist parties had their structures well established before the emergence of an established parliamentary group.

We saw in the case of the organizational history of the Labour party that Labour also originated in this fashion, developing a vigorous national organi-

zation before becoming a parliamentary force. And we saw also that the party's subsequent emergence as a force in Westminster created a powerful tension between its parliamentary and extra-parliamentary components. The creation of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, in which for the first time the two nationalist parties have significant representation and a genuine possibility of capturing government, means that the potential for this history of tension is being recreated within nationalism. It is, however, still too soon to say whether this potential is being realized.

As we survey the parties that have emerged to challenge the domination of Conservative and Labour we move along a spectrum in which extra-parliamentary party organization is increasingly important: this is more true in the case of nationalists than in the case of the Liberal Democrats, and even truer in the case of the Greens. This is partly, perhaps, because the Greens have yet to make the breakthrough of winning even a single seat in the Westminster Parliament, and have only a tiny representation even under the more proportional electoral systems choosing members of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. But it is also because the Greens have sought to develop a distinctive philosophy of organization, which emphasizes the internal control of the party by members. Two distinctive signs of this are leadership selection and the formal methods of policy decision: until now, the Greens have insisted on a collective leadership rather than identifying a single figure as leader; and they stress the importance of party conventions involving large numbers of members as the crucial mechanism of policy choice.

The regulation of political parties

Until the 1990s, in describing the organization of political parties, we could content ourselves largely with describing their own internal systems of organization. They were essentially voluntary institutions that governed their own affairs, but the Elections and Political Parties Act 2000 greatly changed the environment in which almost all

POLITICAL ISSUES

14.1   THE FALL OF JOHN SWINNEY: DILEMMAS OF NATIONALISM

In June 2004 John Swinney resigned as leader of the Scottish National Party, having served as Leader since September 2000. The short term reasons for his resignation arose from personal rivalries at the top of the party – one leading Member of the Scottish Parliament had been suspended for criticizing Swinney's leadership – and poor electoral performance: the SNP fared disappointingly in the elections for the European Parliament in 2004 and, crucially, dropped eight seats in the elections for the Scottish Parliament in 2003. But beneath these short-term issues lie more fundamental ones which create great strategic dilemmas for nationalist parties that seek independence by peaceful, constitutional means in the new devolved British system of government. Two sets of issues are critical. First, what is the ideological colour of nationalism? The aim of independence can unite people of very different political philosophies, and the struggle for independence encourages them to sink their differences. But the existence of the Scottish Parliament with significant legislative powers posed the question: how radical or conservative was the SNP? Was the SNP's best electoral strategy to exploit radical dissatisfaction with Labour? The fact that the SNP lost nine seats, while the Scottish Socialist Party and the Scottish Greens between them picked up 11 seats in the 2003 elections, suggested that such a strategy was not viable. Alternatively, should it try to totally supplant the Conservatives as the Scottish party of business and the middle class? The second issue is: what should the attitude of nationalists be to devolved institutions? John Swinney's strategy was to work the devolved institutions, aiming to convince sufficient voters to make the SNP the governing party in the devolved system and then to offer a referendum on independence. But for many in the party this involved working with institutions that were patently designed to kill off the possibility of independence by permanently establishing the compromise of devolution. The election of Alex Salmond to the post of Leader, from which he had resigned in 2000 (see People in Politics 14.1, p. 310) puts the SNP into the hands of a leader with more proven capacities, but does not eliminate the great dilemmas of nationalism. The SNP recovered a little ground in the 2005 general election.

The fall of John Swinney thus highlights three sets of issues for all constitutional nationalists in the United Kingdom, not in Scotland alone:

- What distinctive social philosophies, left or right, should nationalists adopt?
- How far should they cooperate with non-nationalist parties?
- How far should they try to ensure the success of devolved institutions that are intended to frustrate their long-term aim of independence?

political parties operate. For the first time it created a framework of state regulation for the operation of many aspects of party life, notably to do with party finance and campaigning (see Briefing 14.3).

The immediate origin of the Act lies in the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. It will be recalled that we summarized the content of this report in Chapter 5 (see Briefing 5.2, p. 86). The Committee's investigations in turn were prompted by scandals connected to party financing in the early 1990s. However, its report covered much more than the narrow area of party financing itself, and the Act of 2000 has also been correspondingly wide. It does four particularly important things.

Briefing

THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION: A NEW REGULATOR FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

The Electoral Commission is an innovation in British politics: for the first time, political parties (and the conduct of elections) are subject to a statutory regulatory body. The Commission's powers derive from the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA).
The Boundary Committee for England – formerly the Local Government Commission for England – became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission in April 2002. Thus the only statutory body hitherto concerned with the regulation of elections is now incorporated into the Commission.

The Commission's main legal duties are:

● to keep a register of political parties under the 2000 Act without registration, an organization cannot now be named as a political party on any ballot paper (though individuals are still free to stand)
● to ensure that applicants for registration comply with the registration and financial regulatory requirements of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000
● to ensure that, once registered, parties comply with the statutory reporting requirements of the PPERA and the relevant parts of the Representation of People Act 1983
● to regulate the conduct of any future referendums in Britain.

Beyond its strict statutory duties, the Commission is now the main institution offering guidance on the workings of the 2000 Act, and it has a wider responsibility to review the functioning of competitive elections in Britain.

Source: Information from Electoral Commission.

➲ The establishment of the Electoral Commission in 2000 was an epoch-making event in the history of political parties in Britain. It signals a decisive change in the official view of parties: they are no longer private associations, but public bodies who must be regulated as to their organization and finances. For a discussion of what this means for the nature of parties, see the last main section of this chapter.

It sets rules for giving and accepting party donations

This is the aspect of the new regime of regulation that most directly arises from the scandals of the 1990s, when the two main parties were revealed as accepting donations from questionable sources, and suspicions existed that party policies, and government policies, were being adjusted to the interests of big donors. Now, all gifts in excess of £5,000 nationally and £1,000 locally must be declared.

It 'caps' the cost of general election campaigns

It sets the limit that can be spent on a national campaign at £30,000 per constituency, which means that parties contesting virtually all seats (as Conservative and Labour do) are limited to just under £20 million per campaign.

It establishes a wider set of rules for the registration of political parties

This is potentially the most far reaching consequence of the 2000 legislation. The Electoral Commission (see below) is a body with statutory power to register a political party – and registration is a condition of fighting elections under a party label (see Documenting Politics 14.1). In considering whether to register a party, the Commission has to inspect and approve a party's scheme for regulating its financial affairs, such as the officers it appoints and the reporting arrangements it devises. This also

DOCUMENTING POLITICS 14.1

REGISTERING A NEW POLITICAL PARTY

Application To Register A Political Party In Great Britain & Northern Ireland

The Electoral Commission

RP1 UK

Important: the accompanying Guidance Notes (RP1UK/GN) should be read before completing this form, which can be used to register a party in GB and NI.

1 Declaration to register

The party named below is applying to be a registered party in accordance with the requirements of Part II of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

I declare that the _____ [name of party]

intends to contest one or more relevant elections in Northern Ireland and one or more such elections in Great Britain and is accordingly applying to be registered in both the Northern Ireland register and in the following part(s) of the Great Britain register:

England

Scotland

Wales

2 Signatures GB Party

Proposed Registered Party Leader/Nominating Officer (delete as applicable)

I declare that I am authorised to sign this application on behalf of the above named party.

Signed

Printed name   Date

Proposed Registered Treasurer

I declare that I am authorised to sign this application on behalf of the above named party.

Signed

Printed name   Date

Proposed Campaigns Officer (if applicable)

I declare that I am authorised to sign this application on behalf of the above named party.

Signed

Printed name   Date

Checked by:

Date of Receipt

Date Entered in Database

File Reference Number

Great Britain Party

3 Party Name

English

Welsh

Other language & English Translation

4 Address (Party Headquarters or for correspondence if no HQ)

Town   County

Post code

Telephone number

Fax number

Website/E-mail address

5 Emblems

Details of emblems submitted on separate sheet(s)? Yes No
(enter number)

6 Party Leader

Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Other   First Name(s)   Surname

Name

Home address

County   Post code

If Leader for a particular purpose, please specify

Nominating Officer

Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Other   First Name(s)   Surname

Name

Home address

County   Post code

Additional Officer (if necessary)

Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Other   First Name(s)   Surname

Name

Home address

County   Post code

Treasurer

Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Other   First Name(s)   Surname

Name

Home address

County   Post code

Campaigns Officer (if applicable)

Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Other   First Name(s)   Surname

Name

Home address

County   Post code

⮕ The document illustrates how far the formation and regulation of parties has now become a state function in the United Kingdom, and how far as a result the rules governing parties have become complex. The document is only an *extract* from the whole. Registering a party now involves completing a ten page form, downloadable from the Electoral Commission website. This also includes an appendix requiring details of all separate accounting units in each party (such as women's sections, constituency parties, etc.). Completing the form also involves use of detailed accompanying guidance notes.

Source: Extracted from: Electoral Commission, Form RPUK1, 2003.

extends to a system for regulating 'third parties': in other words, registered, approved donors to parties.

It establishes a permanent, highly active regulator not only for parties, but for elections and referendums

It does this in the form of the Electoral Commission. The Commission's statutory (legally prescribed) duties relate in part to issues summarized above. In particular, it registers political parties (over 120 registered thus far) and it receives and scrutinizes reports on the sources and size of political donations. In effect, it is the main scrutinizer of the financial affairs of all registered political parties. But it does much more: it is now the main public body concerned with the regulation of elections – including referendums – in the widest sense. The range of these duties is impressively wide. It includes:

● Preparing and publishing a report on administration of all relevant elections, including all referenda

● Keeping under review and reporting on electoral boundaries of constituencies for both national parliaments and local government

● Reviewing and reporting on all political advertising via electronic media

● Keeping under review and reporting on the registration of political parties and their income and expenditure.

These statutory duties relate to the actual conduct of elections and of the main institutions that fight them, political parties. But the Commission also has wider responsibilities designed to improve the capacities of parties to contribute to the democratic process. These include:

● Developing and administering policy development grants to political parties
● Promoting public awareness about the electoral process in Britain
● Regulating the wording of any referendum bill introduced in the United Kingdom.

The changing organization of parties: from mass parties to cartel parties?

Throughout the twentieth century political parties were institutions vital to British democracy. They provided one of the main mechanisms by which the people at large could express political views and, in particular, support competing political programmes. In principle they were thus a key means by which popular choices could be made between alternative policy preferences in government. They were also key institutions in the system of interest representation, because the two-party system that dominated British government after 1918 allied the two main parties to competing interests in Britain: the Labour party to organized trade unions and a large section of the manual working class; the Conservatives to large parts of the business community and of the middle class. The parties were also important institutions of direct participation in politics because they both had a mass membership, but the nature of this mass participation showed that parties not only facilitated democratic participation, they also defined its limits. Labour and the Conservatives utterly dominated the party system and both, despite their different histories, were in turn heavily dominated by parliamentary leaderships which operated to a substantial degree independently of the party at large (see Debating Politics 14.1).

Important changes in organization, changes that now stretch back over more than two decades, are altering the structure of parties and the way they function, and in so doing they are contributing to the changing character of democratic politics. The mass party is a thing of the past, as antiquated as the manual typewriter and the roneo duplicator (two technologies, incidentally, that it used very effectively). This change is partly due to changed patterns of campaigning, which now demands much less by way of huge numbers of active supporters on the doorsteps of individual voters. Parliamentary parties are no longer so independent of the wider party organization. This is partly because the parties that have risen to challenge the supremacy of Labour and the Conservatives – such as the Nationalists and the Liberal Democrats – have much stronger traditions of engagement between their parliamentary leadership and the party in the country. But, as we have seen, there have also been changes in the organization of Labour and the Conservatives, and these changes have given the party outside Parliament a bigger say in party government. The best 'headline' sign of the change is the way the choice of party leader is no longer the monopoly of Labour or Conservative Westminster parliamentarians. The role of the party in interest representation has also changed. There has been a weakening of links in the case of the Conservatives and Labour between the party and the big interests to which they were historically close: business and the trade unions. In part this separation is the work of the party leaderships, as they calculated that they needed to widen their electoral base, and to do this they needed to distance themselves from sectional interests. That has been an important feature of the reshaping of the union–party relationship in the Labour party in recent years. In part it has been due to the organized interests. As we saw in Chapter 9, functional interests are increasingly well organized in their own specialist institutions, and close alliance with political parties increasingly looks like a very blunt instrument of interest representation. Why not cut out the middleman – the political party – and do the job directly through interest group organization?

The decline of mass membership; the increasingly distant connection with special interests; the

══ DEBATING POLITICS ══

14.1   POLITICAL PARTIES: ENEMY OR FRIEND OF BRITISH DEMOCRACY?

Parties are vital to the health of British democracy:

■ Elections are at the centre of the democratic process, and parties are the way choice is offered at elections.
■ Parties remain open, voluntary bodies through which citizens can participate in politics.
■ Parties have become increasingly democratic in their formal organization, and increasingly transparent in their financing and regulation.
■ Parties are vital institutions of democratic interest representation, complementing interest groups and catering in particular for groups that find formal interest organization difficult.

Parties damage the health of British democracy

■ The choice parties offer voters in British parliamentary elections is limited and crude and fails to allow significant, discriminating selection.
■ Parties have lost huge numbers of members in the last generation, and have become moribund institutions dependent on state handouts and rich backers.
■ The adversarial style practised by the main British parties produces crude, aggressive debate which alienates most citizens.
■ Behind a rhetoric of common interest parties are tied to sectional interests and parliamentary factions.

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staggering cost of the new styles of campaigning; all these factors have combined to create serious financial problems for political parties. It was these financial problems that lay behind the scandals of the 1990s and the reforms of the legislation of 2000 described above. They thus explain the final important organizational change described in this chapter: the increasing regulation of political parties by a public body, the Electoral Commission.

The summary we have provided so far suggests that parties are declining institutions. But there is another way of reading change: that while a particular kind of mass party is in decline, this is not true of party as a political phenomenon. The influential theory of the *cartel* party suggests that we are seeing not decline, but transformation (Katz and Mair 1995). The theory of the cartel party suggests the following. Parties are increasingly providing functions for the state – such as supplying leaders in government – rather than functions for the wider society. As state servants they are decreasingly reliant on money or membership from that wider society. They are *cartel* parties because, rather like firms that can 'rig' a market by colluding in a cartel, they manipulate the political marketplace to protect

the position of established parties against outsiders.

It is plain that the marks of 'decline' in the British mass party, notably the fall in membership, can be read as a shift to a 'cartel'-like character. The appearance of a state regulator, in the form of the Electoral Commission, is also consistent with the cartel party thesis. The history of state funding of parties also 'fits' the thesis. State funding began in 1975 as a quite modest subsidy to opposition parties in the Westminster House of Commons, to help provide some research support. In the 1990s it was first extended to the House of Lords and then, in 1999, was increased greatly in scale (threefold, in fact). Funding of opposition parties is plainly a significant step to transforming the party into a state institution.

Despite this evidence, it is doubtful that the 'cartel' party thesis fits Britain well. (It does fit parties in some other European states better.) There are two reasons for this. First, while the scale of state funding has indeed grown, the parties still rely tremendously on the wider society to provide them with the funds to fight elections. Second, the evidence of party support does not support the 'cartel' thesis, or at least suggests that, if these are

cartel parties, they are pretty hopeless at rigging the political marketplace. The history of party support, as we have seen in this chapter and will see in even more detail in Chapter 17, is a history of declining support for the dominant institutions in the 'cartel'. Outsiders – Liberal Democrats, nationalists – have gone a long way to busting the cartel.

REVIEW

The main themes of this chapter are as follows:

1 Parties organize for many reasons, and these different motives often import great tension into the internal life of parties
2 The single most important long-term change to affect party organization in the last generation is the decline of mass membership parties
3 The party's role in interest representation has been partly supplanted by the rise of specialist pressure groups
4 Parties, once largely private association that ran their own affairs, are being increasingly regulated by public rules.

One further reason the established parties are an ineffective cartel takes us back to a key theme of this book: the reality of multi-level governance. Devolution has accelerated the spatial fragmentation of the parties. The different logics of electoral competition under different electoral systems in the devolved governments, and the different pressures created by those governing systems, have all undermined the parties as 'United Kingdom' institutions. Thus not only is the mass party in decline; parties that maintain a UK-wide cohesion are also becoming increasingly hard to sustain.

Further reading

Webb (2000) is the most important modern study of parties. McKenzie (1963), the great classic study, is a 'must' for any serious beginner on the organization and history of parties. Pinto-Duschinsky (1981) is a great study of finance, with implications that go well beyond finance, and the work of Fisher (for instance, 2003) always keeps the story up to date. Whiteley and Seyd (2002) are authoritative on party activism.