# 10

# The Politics of Power: a Life History of the Party System

This chapter is the first of two on political parties. Although unknown to the constitution, parties dominate the real world of politics; they are symbols of the modern age. The first section examines the concept of the modern mass party. Parties in a democracy should not be seen in isolation; it is in their essential nature to be linked through competition and cooperation. The following sections identify a series of key periods in the evolution of the party system, concluding with an evaluation of British two-party politics.

## Defining parties

Any political movement can describe itself as a party, but in a democracy **political parties** are essentially associations with a common set of beliefs and goals, and aiming to take office by constitutional means. Some commentators see the quest for office overriding all else, portraying parties as vote-maximizing machines (analogous to profit-maximizing firms) prepared to pursue any policy that commands support (Downs 1957: ch. 7). While much behaviour bears this out, parties usually reflect ideologies to some extent, though over time they may pick and choose from the ideological cafeteria in the quest for support (see pp. 23–5).

***The modern mass party*** The major British parties are large associations essentially comprising three elements: a parliamentary cadre of elected MPs, a bureaucracy and a large extra-parliamentary army in constituency associations. These **mass parties** evolved as a direct result of extensions to the franchise.

No Government can be long secure without a formidable Opposition.

Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby* (1844: book II, ch. 1)

***Functions of parties*** Parties play multifarious roles in political life. Elections are their great celebrations; they energize campaigns, feed the media and mobilize voters. In addition, they organize the life of Parliament; without them the Palace of Westminster would be an empty shell of anachronistic ritual. They also shape popular opinion, set the political agenda, stimulate public debate and, in doing so, help to provide political education. Recruiting people into politics and training them in the Machiavellian arts is another party function; historically Labour has been important in enabling working-class participation. Mass parties also aggregate diverse interests, constructing the compromises that help maintain social stability. When out of government they continue to play a crucial role, providing political opposition: without this, democracy is in peril. In the 1983 election campaign Conservative minister Francis Pym expressed fear of too weak a Labour opposition; similar sentiments were repeated by some commentators after Labour's 1997 and 2001 triumphs.

## The party system

Parties in a democracy do not exist in isolation. The British parties have been inextricably entwined, cross-fertilizing each other with philosophy, policy, strategy and organizational form. They have even made physical contact, to fight or to hold together in the warm embrace of coalition, sometimes even exchanging vital fluids as factions have surged from one to impregnate the other. Each party can therefore only be understood as part of a **party system.** It is usual to classify these in terms of *number* of parties and their relative dominance, thus distinguishing four types.

- **Multi-party:** more than two parties; governments usually coalitions.
- **Two-party**: two parties share dominance, each capable of forming an entire government. In reality, minor parties always exist and a more realistic term is *two-party dominant*.
- **Single-party-dominant**: several parties compete but one stands like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, able to command either an overall majority or remain the dominant partner in successive coalitions.
- **Single-party**: such 'systems' are unlikely to arise naturally and occur mainly under totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany, communist Eastern Europe or certain ex-colonial states), usually after the opposition has been eliminated.

Although it is common to characterize Britain as having a two-party system, this must be subject to qualification. There is usually an important third-party presence; indeed, seventy-one different parties actually contested the 2001 election. The system is best understood through its evolution.

## Genesis

From the settling dust of seventeenth-century constitutional struggles emerged two parliamentary groupings – the Tories, a landowning cadre avowing fidelity to the King, and the Whigs, devoted to trade and the parliamentary cause. These dominated into the nineteenth century. As **cadre parties** they existed only in Parliament and had little ideology save the protection of self-interest. These primitive organisms were forced under the radical sun, to crawl from the mud of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century court and parliamentary intrigue onto the hard ground of democracy. The nineteenth-century extensions of the franchise opened the age of the modern mass party.

### The Conservatives: the era of Peel and Disraeli

By the 1820s, under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington, the Tories appeared to be collapsing before the radical pressures unleashed by the industrial revolution, fatally vulnerable before any extension of the franchise. However, following the 1832 Reform Act, they experienced an unexpected revival under resourceful leader Sir Robert Peel (1788–1850), who gave them a *raison d'être* beyond self-interest by identifying with Burke's view of conservatism (see p. 40). Asserting tradition over radicalism, it was exceedingly attractive to those whose interests lay in the status quo – the landed gentry. Thus the Conservative Party rose, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old Tory Party.

However, another crisis occurred in 1846, the party splitting over the repeal of the Corn Laws, which ended tariff protection of agriculture, favouring commerce and industry at the expense of land. Two groups emerged: the more radical one (containing many who had entered Parliament as a result of the 1832 Reform Act), favouring free trade, moved towards the Whigs, with whom they finally merged (forming the Liberal Party). The future of the landed interests again seemed vulnerable but the party was to find a second visionary to lead it from the wilderness. Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81) not only parted the difficult waters of further franchise extensions, he also created an image to carry the party into the era of mass politics.

> The right honourable gentleman [Sir Robert Peel] caught the Whigs bathing and walked away with their clothes.
>
> Benjamin Disraeli, Commons speech (28 Feb. 1845)

Disraeli's inspiration was to perceive how the interests of privilege could be allied to those of the ordinary folk whose votes were needed. With a rallying cry of 'One Nation', he stressed the Conservative claim to be the natural guardians of *all* sections of society, evoking the empire as a symbol to unite them as members of a dominant race. The life-saving bond entailed a paternalistic commitment to social reform through Acts regulating the sale of food and drugs, public health, artisans' dwellings, river pollution, factory conditions and trade unions. So effective was the strategy that it was a Conservative government that felt confident enough to extend the franchise further in

1867. In gaining working-class support Disraeli had laid the foundations for the modern Conservative Party.

However, after his death the future looked bleak as the traditionalists reasserted their influence. They were saved by the tormented obsession of Gladstone, the Liberal leader, with the Irish question. This split the Liberals in 1886, propelling a group of unionist defectors, led by a radical Joseph Chamberlain, into the Conservative ranks. Subsequently the party acknowledged its commitment to Ireland's link with the mainland by adopting the title 'Conservative and Unionist Party'. The influx returned to the party some Whiggish blood, enabling it to accommodate the rising bourgeoisie increasingly dominating the social order. The Tory and Whig strands offered a formidable electoral potential, which was to become fundamental to the party's remarkable width of appeal.

## The Liberals: the era of Gladstone

You cannot fight against the future. Time is on our side.

W. E. Gladstone, speech on the Reform Bill (1866)

The Liberal Party was a major force for only around half a century. In its heyday it experienced some great periods of office, its social and constitutional reforms standing as its monument. Yet like a figure in classical tragedy, the party (and its leaders) seemed to contain from the first the seeds of self-destruction. The modern party was established in 1859 through the fusion of the old Whigs with the new Radicals and the free-trade faction haemorrhaging from the Tories. This latter infusion provided one of its greatest figures, William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98), whose austere presence, the very antithesis of the polished Disraeli, dominated in the nineteenth century. The rationale of liberalism lay in radicalism and reform (pp. 26–34); impatient with traditional institutions it supported business and commerce through *laissez-faire* and free trade. Beyond the economy there was Irish home rule, nonconformity, parliamentarianism and social reform.

## The emergence of mass parties

The two great Reform Acts hardened the fluid parliamentary alliances with a new sense of party discipline, greatly enhancing the leaders' authority. Gladstone and Disraeli forged the characteristic two-party system with its **adversarial** style of parliamentary thrust and parry. It was no longer possible to gain election through corruption and the parties fostered organizations in the constituencies (registration societies) to ensure that all sympathizers would vote. The local associations were also given the crucial responsibility of choosing candidates.

To oversee the local activists two London clubs – the Carlton for the Conservatives and the Reform for the Liberals – became party headquarters and federations of local organizations were established to forge a sense of national unity. The Liberal Registration Association, founded in 1861, was followed in

1867 by the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations. The mass membership suggested problems of control: the Conservative Union seemed content to serve the leaders but the Liberal Federation claimed rights over party policy, which Gladstone resisted. Both associations also held annual conferences in which the toilers in the constituency fields could voice their opinions. By the end of the century the mould for the modern system had been cast: parties were ideologically based mass organizations, led by elites, seeking office by courting the electorate.

## Challenge to the Established Order: the Rise of the Labour Party

One of the remarkable aspects of franchise reform was the failure of a working-class party to capitalize on the potential in the mass vote – a manifestation of the power of the dominant classes to keep participation as a choice between two elites. They did this by showing some concern for the working class. Conservatives set out their 'one-nation' stall while the Liberals embraced the new liberalism and promoted major social reforms in the early twentieth century (national insurance, pensions, unemployment benefits and employment exchanges). However, a revolutionary ideology was taking shape; Marx's trenchant critique of liberalism meant that things could not remain as they were. Socialist movements were forming and some working-class activists sought to enter the parliamentary stage themselves.

### Labour pre-history

The Labour Party was born of a long and painful confinement. Although opposed by establishment forces, the Chartists had argued from the 1830s for a working-class parliamentary voice. In 1869 the trade unions created a Labour Representation League but, although two of its thirteen candidates were returned in 1874, it showed little promise. Some working-class candidates also managed to enter Parliament under the Liberal banner; by 1885 there were eleven Trade Union Liberal MPs. However, the Liberals remained reluctant to cooperate. Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson were all spurned as candidates – had they not been there might never have been a Labour Party.

During the 1880s and 1890s a socialist dynamic came from three associations. At the extreme left was the London-based Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), led by H. M. Hyndman. Of different character was the Fabian Society, founded in 1884 by George Bernard Shaw and the indefatigable social researchers Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It took its name from Quintus Fabius Maximus ('the Delayer'), a Roman general who achieved success by small, cautious moves and delaying tactics rather than reckless

bravado – such was the avowed strategy of **Fabianism**. Most important was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded in 1893 to pursue moderate socialism and numbering amongst its members Philip Snowden, MacDonald and Hardie. Yet in the 1880s there were only some 2,000 active socialists in the entire country. Despite meagre social improvements, the working class remained content to vote for the elite duopoly and the ILP gained little support. However, a more aggressively socialist New Unionism introduced a new dynamic. In the late 1890s, damaging defeats in large strikes made the case for direct parliamentary representation more compelling.

## Emerging from the womb

In 1900, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) made the momentous decision to seek a parliamentary presence. The might of sixty-five trade unions, with their hundreds of thousands of members, combined with the intellectual vigour of the three small organizations to establish the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). Significantly, its strategy was to be in the Fabian tradition: revisionist ('Labourism') rather than revolutionary socialism. At a very early stage the SDF disengaged from the inhibiting embrace.

The Conservative government reacted with intense hostility, portraying the movement as a threat to the constitution and requiring harsh treatment. A series of judicial decisions, culminating in the infamous Taff Vale Judgment of 1901 (holding that unions could be cripplingly sued for tortious acts of members), convinced more unions of the need to combine under the new banner, and one of the movement's key figures, Ramsay MacDonald (LRC secretary), worked to develop a national mass organization.

> MacDonald owes his pre-eminence largely to the fact that he is the only artist, the only aristocrat by temperament and talent in a party of plebeians and plain men.
>
> Beatrice Webb (1858–1943; founder member of the Fabian Society), *Diary* (May 1905)

***Labour and the Liberals*** Although a fundamental principle of the new party was to oppose established elites, an early pragmatic advantage was gained by a secret agreement with the Liberals. Each party would withhold candidates from selected constituencies to unify the anti-Conservative vote. Through this stratagem the new party signalled its entrance onto the parliamentary stage in 1906 with twenty-nine MPs, who together took the title Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). The election also saw the return of twenty-four Lib–Labs. For the first time there was a formidable working-class phalanx in Parliament. An early success was the 1906 Trades Disputes Act, reversing the Taff Vale Judgment. However, their prime object was to ingratiate themselves with the Establishment by demonstrating *responsible* behaviour (Miliband 1961: 28). At this


*Source*: Mary Evans Picture Library

stage the Liberals felt no threat and formed a highly distinguished government, laying the foundations of the British welfare state.

Yet these were turbulent times. The Liberal programme led to a dramatic confrontation with the House of Lords, resulting in the 1911 Parliament Act (see chapter 12) and near civil war over Ireland (see pp. 157–8). Labour became more closely wedded to the Liberals, a development derided by its left wing, which argued for a distinct identity. The first world war provided an opportunity for this.

## War and the Inter-war Era

The year 1914 marks the beginning of the Liberals' decline (Wilson 1966). It was the party's misfortune to be in office at the outbreak of war. As prime minister, Herbert Asquith (1852–1928) became the leader of a coalition in 1915 but soon proved unequal to the task. 'His initiative, if he ever had any, was sapped by years of good living in high society' (Taylor 1965: 14) and, following a series of military defeats, he was ousted in 1916 by fellow Liberal David Lloyd George (1863–1945), who formed a new coalition with a Conservative majority.

For Labour, war provided a taste of office and a chance to demonstrate patriotic qualities. It shed its pacifist garb and MacDonald (supported by the

pacifist ILP) resigned the leadership to be replaced by Arthur Henderson, who gained influence and was even included in the War Cabinet. However, dealings with international socialism led to his ejection in 1917, leaving him free to prepare for the greater role that Liberal disarray seemed to promise. With MacDonald and intellectuals such as Sidney Webb, Henderson drew up a new socialist constitution, including the famous *Clause Four*, with its commitment to public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. It also recognized the importance of widening party membership, making provision for individuals to join constituency associations in their own right rather than as trade unionists. The 1918 conference formally approved a wide programme, *Labour and the New Social Order*, which was to be the mainspring for policy for the next thirty years (Pelling 1968: 44).

## The birth of the 1922 Committee

The immediate aftermath of war proved disastrous for the Liberals. Lloyd George rushed into an opportunistic general election in 1918 by offering further coalition government. Coalition candidates were endorsed with a letter signed jointly by Lloyd George and Conservative leader Bonar Law, dubbed the 'coupon' by Asquith, leader of the independent Liberals, in sarcastic evocation of wartime rationing. Asquith lost his seat and only twenty-eight of his supporters were returned, but Lloyd George had played into the hands of the Conservatives, delivering his own party into a political netherworld.

Though faring badly against what was an anti-socialist alliance, Labour demonstrated its muscle by fielding 361 candidates, a considerable increase on its previous best of seventy-eight in 1910, and the freak circumstances gave little indication of real trends. The coalition proved unpopular and, after a string of by-election failures (mainly gains for Labour), Bonar Law agreed, at a momentous meeting at the Carlton Club in 1922, that it was time to bid farewell to Lloyd George before he destroyed the Conservatives as he had the Liberals. As a by-product, a new institution had been created: the Conservative 1922 Committee.

## Labour: a viable government

The Liberals were left in disarray, candidates fighting the ensuing general election as either 'Lloyd George' or 'Asquith' Liberals. Labour's parliamentary strength rose to 142, giving it second-party status. The number of ILP-sponsored candidates reached 32, with an influx of intellectuals giving a wider appeal and more rhetorical virtuosity. It began to attract ambitious young Liberals despairing of the schism within their own party. With increased parliamentary strength, the heady possibility of taking over the reins of government could be contemplated. Ambitions were realized in late 1923 when Conservative prime minister Stanley Baldwin dissolved Parliament over tariff

reform. Although the Liberals revived with 158 seats, Labour increased its presence to 191 (39 ILP). The single-issue nature of the election meant that, despite its 258 seats, the government had been rejected. The Liberals felt justified in supporting Labour, which momentously ruled for ten months as a **minority government**. Not surprisingly, so tenuous a period of office produced little reform and was attacked by socialist purists. This was a hard judgement on the leaders, who had been faced with a task hitherto the preserve of those with wealth, position and a solid tradition of parliamentary organization. Labour providing a government was, like the proverbial dog walking on its hind legs, remarkable for being done at all.

***Labour versus the Establishment*** Yet the experience offered a stark illustration of establishment power. The government was undermined with alarmist propaganda and deceit, Anglo-Soviet relations being a particularly sensitive area. The final straw came in the Campbell case. The Attorney General's decision to drop sedition proceedings in a minor case against the editor of a small communist journal was fanned up as evidence of corruption. The Liberals grew nervous, withdrawing their support and forcing MacDonald to dissolve Parliament. The ensuing election campaign saw one of the shabbiest scandals of British politics – the Zinoviev letter (see p. 690). Chilling press warnings that a vote for Labour was a vote for a Soviet system saw the Establishment regain its hold on the tiller.

Yet the value of Parliament to working-class aspirations was underlined in the abysmal failure of the 1926 general strike, which renewed commitment to the Labour Party. With 288 seats it emerged from the 1929 election as the largest single party; it was a turning point in British politics. The Liberals had crossed the electoral Rubicon, the bias of the electoral system beginning to weigh against them. Their future seemed to lie only in some form of union with Labour and a second minority government was formed, though for the Liberals the embrace was to be that of the praying mantis.

> There are no professions he ever made, no pledges he ever gave to the country, and no humiliation to which he would not submit if they would allow him still to be called Prime Minister.
>
> Viscount Snowden on MacDonald, House of Lords speech (3 July 1934)

***MacDonald's disgrace*** However, Labour was also to encounter troubled waters. From the outset the government was severely hamstrung by the Liberals in the Commons and the Conservatives in the Lords. Problems were exacerbated by economic depression, the Cabinet split over expenditure cuts (particularly unemployment benefit) as a condition of international loans and, on 23 August 1931, MacDonald resigned as prime minister. However, the following day he stunned colleagues by accepting the King's invitation to

form a Conservative-dominated *National Government*. Together with some followers he was disowned by his party and in the coalition became a prisoner of his Cabinet. He was obliged to fight the next election in the grip of the coalition; 'National candidates' sought a 'doctor's mandate' to heal the country's maladies. Labour fared disastrously with only 46 seats and Conservatives dominated the new coalition. For Labour, these events marked the end of an era, fortunes remaining at a low ebb until 1935. Ex-barrister Clement Attlee (1883–1967) became leader, the first to lack genuine working-class credentials, and although not recovering its 1929 position, the party revived with 154 seats, while the Liberals wandered further into the wilderness.

***The close of an era: the second world war*** The next war led to Labour's further entrenchment. The party at first refused to join a coalition but later agreed, providing it would not be led by Neville Chamberlain, discredited for his appeasement policy. Thus it could claim to have brought Winston Churchill to power and did well in the apportionment of offices, with Attlee and Greenwood both in Churchill's first War Cabinet of five. Attlee became generally recognized as deputy prime minister.

***At the fringe*** During the inter-war years a number of small parties emerged. The Communist Party was founded in 1920 though its attempts to affiliate to Labour were rebuffed. Welsh nationalism was reflected in the establishment of Plaid Cymru in 1925. Nationalism was stronger in Scotland, coalescing into a

**The Liberals: decline and fall**

The collapse of the Liberal Party remains one of the cautionary tales of British politics. Despite a landslide victory in 1906 and a period of great reform, a decade after the outbreak of the war it had a parliamentary presence of only forty-two. There is no simple explanation. One historian likened the demise to that of a frail old gent, troubled by a variety of serious ailments (Labour, suffragettes, Ireland), with misfortunes compounded by a meeting with a rampaging bus (the war); his state of health is easy to diagnose but not the actual cause of death (Wilson 1966: 20–1). In this political whodunit a number of suspects may be assembled along with the butler in the drawing room:

- a congenital tendency to fragment;
- strong personalities whose ambitions overrode party interest;
- the prolonged fight with the suffragettes;
- the misfortune to be in office at the outbreak of the war;
- an inability to adapt to a harsher twentieth-century climate (Dangerfield 1936);
- the loss of radical reformers like Chamberlain, Dilke, Churchill and Lloyd George;
- a healing of the old social cleavage between landowners and capitalists, who began to unite as Conservatives (Taylor 1965: 172);
- failure to embrace leading Labour figures;
- a willingness to allow Labour to gather strength through electoral pacts (Wilson 1966: 19);
- defections to Labour in the inter-war years;
- the British electoral system.

party in 1928. In 1932, Oswald Mosley left the Conservatives to found the British Union of Fascists, which grew to over 30,000 members.

## The Era of Consensus: the End of Ideology?

**The masters now**

We are the masters at the moment – and not only for the moment but for a very long time to come.

Lord Shawcross (member of 1945 Labour government), Commons speech (2 April 1946)

After the war Churchill agreed to an early general election. The 1945 result gave every indication of a revolution in British politics, a Labour landslide producing its first overall majority. The swing in the marginal seats introduced a new kind of Labour MP, drawn from the professions and giving the PLP a broader character. Despite a regime of severe post-war austerity, the government embarked upon an agenda intended to shake the foundations of economic and social life. The aura of office increased the leader's authority, further enhanced by trade union loyalty, but Attlee remained anxious for establishment respect, supporting capitalism, reining in socialistic expectations and even expelling extreme left-wingers.

The popular verdict prompted alarmist talk in middle-class drawing rooms and concentrated Conservative minds, enabling them again to demonstrate the protean qualities that preserved them throughout the era of modern politics. The architect of recovery was R. A. Butler, whose strategy was to challenge Labour at its own game by embracing the new welfare state and Keynesian economics (see p. 513).

By the end of its first hectic term the government was showing fatigue strains; many stalwarts were well past their prime, some stricken with illness and some dead. Furthermore, people were weary of austerity. In 1950 Labour narrowly clung to office but, lacking confidence, Attlee returned to the country the following year. This time, although Labour polled the most votes ever cast for a British party, the idiosyncrasies of the electoral system produced a Conservative majority. Butler had fashioned a bipartisan consensus that began a peace spoken of by the Archbishop of York in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* when 'both parties nobly are subdued, and neither party loser'.

Yet the tranquil consensus interpretation can be misleading; a minority within Labour, led by Aneurin Bevan, were never comfortable pitching the manifesto tent in the middle of the ideological field and prompted enervating infighting. After tenacious resistance, Attlee finally departed in 1955. His replacement, the sternly moderate Hugh Gaitskell, inherited worsening disciplinary problems. Moreover, the supportive trade union old guard was passing

on and the largest union, the TGWU, had fallen under the leadership of left-wing Frank Cousins.

Some Conservatives were also unhappy with consensus. When Churchill finally stepped down, party and government seemed healthy and the succession passed to the smoothly aristocratic Anthony Eden. Yet despite an early election success in 1955, domestic problems mounted, and by spring 1956 his popularity rating had nose-dived from 70 to 40 per cent (Butler and Rose 1960: 36). He was certainly in no state to handle the Suez Crisis in 1956 (see p. 112), which traumatized the Establishment and split the party. Retiring in humiliation, Eden left the party in morbid contemplation of loss of office and possibly two decades in the wilderness.

## Winds of change: the Macmillan era

> By far the most radical man I've known in politics wasn't on the Labour side at all – Harold Macmillan. If it hadn't been for the war he'd have joined the Labour Party… Macmillan would have been Labour Prime Minister, and not me.
>
> Clement Attlee, quoted in James Margach, *The Abuse of Power* (1981)

Eden's departure exposed the arcane process whereby the Conservatives chose (or rather, did not choose) their leader. Party elders conducted soundings and Harold Macmillan was preferred over the diligent Butler. Yet the choice was to prove inspired. With an Edwardian dilettantism concealing shrewd recognition of the consensus era, he was able not only to rebuild the party substructure but modernize its facade. He also restored self-confidence at home and repaired the damage to Anglo-American relations, earning the cartoonists' moniker 'Supermac'. Yet despite his success the right mistrusted him. In 1960 the Monday Club formed to commemorate 'Black Monday', when he made a celebrated speech on reform in racist South Africa.

> The wind of change is blowing through the continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.
>
> Harold Macmillan, speech in South African Parliament (3 Feb. 1960)

***Labour in the wilderness*** The Suez crisis did not help Labour as expected. Although shocking the intelligentsia, a popular jingoism was shared by many Labour supporters (Pelling 1968: 118). In 1959 the Conservative majority reached 100, a third successive defeat leaving Labour reeling. The post-war inheritance seemed to have been squandered and younger members began to talk of policy revision. In *The Future of Socialism* (1956), Anthony Crosland argued that in an age of affluence public ownership was an anachronism. Gaitskell agreed and confronted the left in a momentous 1960 party conference, where he suffered an heroic failure to remove Clause Four from the party constitution. He was more successful in rejecting unilateral nuclear disarmament as party policy the following year.

> Do you think that we can become overnight the pacifists, unilateralists and fellow travellers that other people are? . . . There are some of us, Mr Chairman, who will fight, fight and fight again to save the party we love.
>
> Hugh Gaitskell, speech to Labour Party Conference (5 Oct. 1960)

***The Night of the Long Knives*** The government had its own troubles. On 13 July 1962, beset by economic problems and falling popularity, a desperate Macmillan reversed the action of *Julius Caesar*, removing one-third of his Cabinet in the greatest bloodbath in the party's history: 'The Night of the Long Knives'. However, it was the exotic Profumo affair that brought the leader's failing touch to a wider, tabloid-devouring public. The party's image was also not helped by the early 1960s penchant for cynicism and satire. Oxbridge undergraduates began poking fun at the Establishment in the theatre (*Beyond the Fringe*), in the press (*Private Eye*) and on television (*That Was The Week That Was*).

## Constitutional change in the Conservative Party

> He is used to dealing with estate workers. I cannot see how anyone can say he is out of touch.
>
> Lady Caroline Douglas-Home, speaking of her father's suitability as prime minister, quoted in the *Daily Herald* (21 Oct. 1963)

> As far as the 14th Earl is concerned, I suppose Mr Wilson, when you come to think of it, is the 14th Mr Wilson.
>
> Sir Alec Douglas-Home, BBC TV interview (21 Oct. 1963)

Macmillan's retirement through ill health in 1963 led to controversy. The patient Butler was again the natural heir, but the aristocratic Sir Alec Douglas-Home was raised from entombment in the House of Lords by renouncing his title. He continued the party's Tory rather than its Whig strain but seemed out of touch with the *zeitgeist*. In the 1964 election campaign, Harold Wilson, Labour's adroit new leader, mocked Home's aristocratic antecedents. Labour won a narrow majority of four; with a different leader the Conservatives

**Scandal**

The Profumo scandal arose from an intriguing *ménage à trois* involving a defence minister, John Profumo, who resigned in 1963, a high-society prostitute (Christine Keeler), a Russian naval attaché and a host of exotic bit players including Mandy Rice Davies (a prostitute), Stephen Ward (an alleged procurer of ladies for the gentry) and a mysterious man (believed to be a respected pillar of the Establishment) featured in photographs wearing a black mask (and little else). It is doubtful if the public were concerned with the security aspects of the affair. The massive newspaper coverage showed the main interest to lie in the intoxicating contemplation of hanky-panky in high places.

might have secured a fourth term. It was agreed that a ballot of the parliamentary party should become the basis for leadership selection and Home resigned.

## The white heat of technology: the Wilson era

> The Labour Party is like a stage coach. If you rattle along at great speed everybody inside is too exhilarated or too seasick to cause any trouble. But if you stop everybody gets out and argues about where to go next.
>
> Harold Wilson, quoted in Leslie Smith, *Harold Wilson: The Authentic Portrait* (1964)

Having acceded to the Labour leadership in 1963 as a result of Gaitskell's unexpected death, Wilson brought a more conciliatory tone. His style was said to have been modelled on the charismatic and youthful President Kennedy.


TARGET PRACTICE

By early 1966 he felt confident enough to ask for a stronger mandate, increasing Labour's overall majority to ninety-six. The influx was predominantly middle-class professionals, reinforcing Wilson's 'white heat of technology' rhetoric. Although the left were dissatisfied, the party began to look more like a 'natural' party of government during this optimistic decade – the 'swinging sixties'. There was some surprise when the government was ejected in 1970 and the glittering decade closed.

### On the fringe

***The Liberal Party*** During the consensus era the Liberal Party had been no more than a bit player, to some a buffoon, to others a figure of tragedy. In the bipartisan scenario it had no place, being neither regionally based nor radical.

***Northern Ireland parties*** In 1955 Sinn Féin reappeared as a political force, contesting all twelve seats (although their three successful candidates were disqualified as felons). In 1970 the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) was founded as the moderate vehicle of the Roman Catholic minority. At the same time, cracks began to appear in the Ulster Unionist Party, which had dominated Northern Ireland's Westminster representation: Ian Paisley, standing as a Protestant Unionist, captured the North Antrim seat (see chapter 6).

## The Consensus Cracked: the 1970s

### Heath: the rise and fall of Selsdon Man

Conscious of Wilson's appeal, the Conservatives applied Newton's Law of Motion to politics by attempting to counter with an equal and opposite force. Edward Heath, the first leader to be elected, was also the first hailing from the party's *petit bourgeois* strain. Although defeated in 1966, he worked to manufacture a technocratic image. A conference of businessmen and politicians at Croydon's Selsdon Park Hotel led to sightings of a new species of *Homo Conservatus* – 'Selsdon Man'. In 1970 Heath pulled off an unexpected *coup*, gaining an overall majority of thirty seats and surprising his own party as much as his opponents.

A long-standing Europhile, he led the nation into the EEC in 1973 and promoted a neoliberal economic agenda at home. However, inflation and rising unemployment led to policy reversals, branded 'U-turns' and taken as evidence of weakness. He also experienced unrelenting union hostility and, in February 1974, called an ill-timed general election to ask 'Who governs?' Although a majority supported him, the electoral system again thwarted voters. Yet Labour lacked an absolute majority and Heath flirted with the Liberals over a possible pact before conceding defeat. The indeterminate situation forced Wilson to return to the country in October, but an overall majority of only three did little

to clarify the confusion. The efficacy of two-party politics was beginning to look doubtful.

In April 1976 Wilson shocked his party with his unexpected retirement. 'Making way for an older man', he bequeathed to James Callaghan bad union relations, economic crisis, IMF-imposed monetarism (see p. 513) and public-sector strikes. By-election defeats rendered the government increasingly fragile, until it could be sustained only with the life-support machine of the 1977–8 Lib–Lab pact. All was to culminate in some cold and gloomy months of 1978–9, entering the political record as the 'winter of discontent'. The media and some academics proclaimed a crisis of governability. The government finally lost a no-confidence vote in March 1979 and the Conservatives returned rejuvenated. Again they had used their time in the reformatory of opposition gainfully, emerging ready to take British party politics into a new era.

### No such thing as society: the coming of Thatcherism

Any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country.

Margaret Thatcher, quoted in the *Observer* (8 May 1979)

Heath's humiliation in 1974 had led to further ordeal by election. On 10 February 1975 he was defeated by Margaret Thatcher, who was to seize radical initiatives on all fronts, the objective no less than a frontal assault on post-war social democratic orthodoxy. She was advised by think-tanks where, outside the formal party machinery, the alchemy of neoliberalism was brewed that was to alter the course of British politics (Riddell 1985: 31).

The 1979 general election was critical. The new leader avowed that (as a woman) she would be permitted just one chance, and the spoils of victory promised riches in the form of a gushing supply of North Sea oil, available for generous tax cuts or increased welfare, according to political fancy. Thatcher also recognized the increasing importance of the mass media and Saatchi and Saatchi were engaged to harness the skills of Madison Avenue. The relationship was to prove symbiotic. For the brothers Saatchi, company stock soared and the general election gave the Conservatives a 60-seat majority over Labour, and Britain's first woman prime minister.

## The Thatcher Era: Fractured Consensus or New Centre?

### The party begins to swing

Initially the new programme faltered; the Cabinet contained a large contingent of 'wets' inherited from Heath, who impeded progress. Unemployment rose and Thatcher's popularity sank to an all-time low for a prime minister. However, a lifeline came from the South Atlantic. The Falklands crisis (see p. 105) gave her the boost she needed. In an upsurge of popular chauvinism her ascendancy became virtually absolute. The years between 1983 and 1987 saw an ideological

flowering, though people spoke not of conservatism but of 'Thatcherism'. The 1987 general election gave the Conservatives a third term with a majority over Labour of 147. However, the pattern of support was becoming increasingly concentrated in the prosperous south-east. In asserting 'there is no such thing as society', Thatcher had renounced the party's 'one-nation' appeal.

## Labour in the 1980s

As if on a see-saw, the fortunes of Labour sank as Conservative stock rose. Michael Foot, once a doyen of the left, replaced Callaghan as leader in 1980. Like the New Right apostles, the hard left abhorred consensus; the years from Attlee to Callaghan were depicted as a betrayal. Although the trade unions had shifted leftwards, it was the constituency associations that became key centres for agitation. In 1973 the party had opened its doors to the far left and Militant Tendency had taken control of many local branches. In 1980, they succeeded in widening the leadership electorate beyond the parliamentary party to the wider membership and instigating compulsory reselection of all MPs. For some the pressures had become too great: choosing flight rather than fight, they founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in March 1981 to reclaim the centre ground.

Labour's 1983 manifesto was described from the right as 'the longest suicide note in history'. In the final stages of the campaign the party's support began to wilt before the new centrist force and only the quirks of the electoral system ensured its survival (figure 10.1). Foot resigned and Neil Kinnock, who had moved to the centre, was elected leader. Though fighting a much better campaign in 1987, the result was again failure.

## On the fringe

In 1985 the Ecology Party relaunched itself as the Green Party and achieved some success in local elections. National Front (NF) support fell away, partly

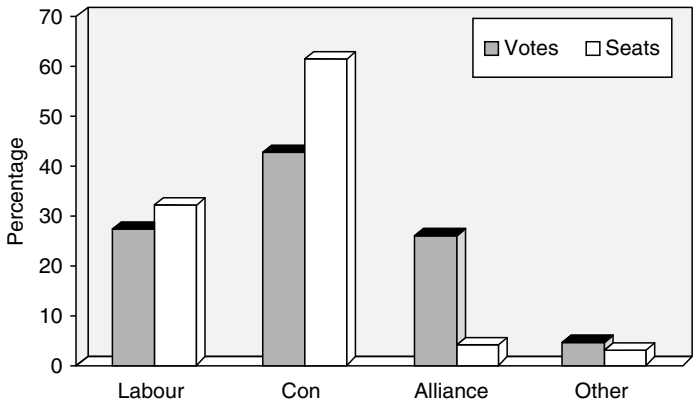



**Figure 10.1** Disproportionate representation: votes and seats compared after the 1983 general election.

won over by Thatcher's brand of Conservatism, and internal splits saw the formation of the British National Party (BNP).

***The rise of the third force*** The birth of the SDP, growing from a rib plucked from Labour's breast, appeared as one of the most dramatic party system developments during the 1980s. Dubbed 'the Gang of Four', its leading figures were seasoned parliamentarians. The rhetoric spoke of 'breaking the mould' of adversarial politics and re-introducing consensus through European-style coalitions (supported by electoral reform). By late 1981, twenty-seven Labour MPs and one Conservative sailed under the new flag and a mass membership of some 70,000 had mushroomed. The fledgling party signalled its presence with some notable by-election victories, two returning Gang of Four members – Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins.

These developments gave new heart to the Liberals and in 1983 they fought under a common Alliance banner with the SDP, gaining 26 per cent of the vote, only 2 per cent below Labour. Proportional representation would have bestowed around 160 seats, but they received a meagre 23 (figure 10.1). In 1987, they gained 22.6 per cent of the votes and only 22 seats. After this, Liberal leader David Steel opened discussions on complete merger, which took place in March 1988. Paddy Ashdown was elected leader and an all-member ballot adopted the name Social and Liberal Democrats.

## The end of an era

The Great Parliamentary Sausage Machine which sucked in public opinion at one end and spewed out popular politics at the other.

Roy Hattersley, retrospectively, on the Labour Listens initiative, in *Who Goes Home?* (1996: 284)

***New times, new realism*** It was becoming apparent to Labour leaders that the party was no longer tuned to the march of history. The New Right agenda was recognized throughout Europe by socialist parties in or out of government. Even the USSR had fallen under the *perestroika* of Mikhail Gorbachev, who established a surprising rapport with Thatcher. The hard left saw any attempt to don Thatcher's clothes as a perverse form of transvestism, but a policy of expulsion removed some 200 of them during the 1980s. By 1989 opinion polls were consistently placing Labour above the Conservatives.

***The fall of Thatcher*** Events in late 1990 were to rock the Conservatives. Dramatic resignations by Chancellor Nigel Lawson and Geoffrey Howe (deputy prime minister) intimated that all was not well in Cabinet, the main source of dissatisfaction being Thatcher's lukewarm European vision and her domineering style. Moreover, fierce hostility towards the poll tax had seen her popularity plummet below 30 per cent. A leadership challenge by Michael Heseltine forced a humiliating second ballot (see p. 325) and, after consulting her Cabinet individually, Thatcher made the decision to resign. John Major emerged from the shadows as the new leader, rewarding Heseltine with a cabinet seat. Thus, the longest premiership since 1827, marked by three electoral triumphs and dramatic policy advances, was terminated not by the electorate nor the party rank and file, but by the Conservative establishment in

perhaps the most brutal political knifing in modern political history. However, the wound was to fester on into the next era.

> But there was one more duty I had to perform, and that was to ensure that John Major was my successor. I wanted – perhaps I needed – to believe that he was the man to secure and safeguard my legacy.
>
> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (1993: 860)

## The Major Years: Things Fall Apart

Major's succession continued the trend away from the party's aristocratic roots. In contrast to his two main rivals, he had left school at sixteen, experienced unemployment and advanced through local politics. The Major years were extraordinary ones for what had long been regarded as Britain's natural party of government. Without Thatcher's confrontational style or zeal, he seemed a more traditional Conservative. When Thatcher asserted that there was no such thing as 'Majorism' he did not dissent (Norton 1993a: 60). Yet he had accepted a poisoned chalice: his task to please both those who yearned for Thatcherism by other means and those wanting change. The 1992 general election victory was particularly important; like Heath in 1970, he could take considerable personal credit. Yet pragmatism led to vacillation, often described as dithering, and a flimsy majority left him vulnerable to rebel factions. The most troublesome of these were the Eurosceptics (some even in his Cabinet), whom he described in an unguarded moment as 'bastards'.

***Eurobastards*** Unlike Thatcher's 'wets', Major's enemies were emboldened with a sense of mission and armed by right-wing think-tanks. The fires were fanned by newspaper editors who did little to conceal personal dislike of the Prime Minister (Rogaly 1997). Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty was a tense process (chapter 5) and was not the end of his problems. The humiliation of 'Black Wednesday' (p. 516) was seen as a defining moment of a blighted premiership.

Tensions reached a crescendo in June 1995 when, in an astonishing resignation of the party leadership, Major threw down the gauntlet, demanding that his critics 'put up or shut up'. While heavyweights shrank from the first ballot, Welsh Secretary John Redwood came forward. His demeanour had earned him the moniker of 'the Vulcan' (of the popular TV series *Star Trek*). Although the pretender was held off, with 111 MPs withholding support, Major's endorsement was only lukewarm. The vacuum left at the Welsh Office was quietly filled by a figure known mainly for his schoolboy speech at a party conference; unlike his predecessor, William Hague began to learn Welsh. Yet although the rebels had put up, they did not shut up. An EU ban on the export of British beef during the BSE crisis made their voices even shriller.

I'm still here.

Satirist and impressionist Rory Bremner as John Major proclaiming his greatest achievement.

### 'Back to Basics': low behaviour in high places

There was another zone of embarrassment. In 1993 Major had launched a 'Back to Basics' initiative, extolling traditional morality and social discipline. It could hardly have come at a worse time. Accusations of sexual and constitutional impropriety saw a lengthening roll of shame, including a motley collection for whom 'Back to Basics' meant back to the backbenches. By 1997 some 10 per cent of the parliamentary party had been involved in some kind of scandal (*Observer*, 30 March 1997). Other *causes célèbres* haunted the government. In March 1994 the Public Accounts Committee castigated the 'entanglement' of aid for the Malaysian Pergau Dam project with defence contracts, and the Arms-for-Iraq affair was subject to the 39-month Scott enquiry, which reported unfavourably on ministerial conduct in 1996.

***The incredible shrinking majority*** In addition to by-election losses came defections to Labour and the Liberal Democrats, leaving Major with a majority of only two. The nine Ulster Unionist MPs found themselves in a pivotal position, reducing his room for manoeuvre in an area where he had moved adroitly – the Downing Street Declaration (see p. 162).

***A natural party of government?*** The polls showed the Conservatives entering the 1997 campaign further behind their rival than any party since 1832. With Labour and the Liberal Democrats giving a clear run to journalist Martin Bell in Neil Hamilton's Tatton constituency, it was impossible for the party to put sleaze behind it. In its Euro-angst it appeared to have sacrificed its historic strength – unity. The Eurosceptics were mainly Thatcherites; indeed, as Baroness Thatcher in the Lords, the lady was still amongst them.

## New Labour, New Consensus

We're alright!
We're alright!
We're alright!
We're alright!

Neil Kinnock at the 1992 pre-election Sheffield rally

Labour's fortunes had reached a nadir in 1992, a fourth successive defeat leading many to ponder whether Britain had become a one-party state. Some declared Kinnock's triumphalist behaviour at an eve-of-poll rally in Sheffield to have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory (Heffernan and Marqusee 1992), but he had moved the party a long way. He resigned and his successor, John Smith, slid into place to continue the work. In September 1992, two of Smith's biggest critics, Bryan Gould and Dennis Skinner, were thrown off the NEC in favour of two fresh-faced modernizers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

The decline in union membership and the shrinkage of the traditional working class argued for a broader appeal. The spectre of the 'winter of discontent' could be exorcized only by 'modernizing' the relationship with the unions. This was faced at the 1993 conference (see chapter 11), where Smith gained agreement for the one member, one vote (OMOV) principle for candidate selection. The party extended its commitment to Scottish and Welsh

devolution, a Bill of Rights, reform of the Lords and a referendum on PR for Westminster.

However, May 1994 saw Smith's fatal heart attack and three leadership contenders emerged: deputy leader Margaret Beckett, Tony Blair and John Prescott. Most importantly, Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown agreed to curb his own ambition to avoid splitting the modernizing vote. The result came as no surprise, Blair being supported by all sections of the electoral college. The contest had not proved divisive and the scale of the victory endorsed modernization. Harmony was further promoted by the election of John Prescott, trusted by traditionalists, as deputy leader.

**Labour Party leaders**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1906 Keir Hardie | 1921 J. R. Clynes | 1963 Harold Wilson |
| 1908 Arthur Henderson | 1922 Ramsay MacDonald | 1976 James Callaghan |
| 1910 George Barnes | 1931 Arthur Henderson | 1980 Michael Foot |
| 1911 Ramsay MacDonald | 1932 George Lansbury | 1983 Neil Kinnock |
| 1914 Arthur Henderson | 1935 Clement Attlee | 1992 John Smith |
| 1917 W. Adamson | 1955 Hugh Gaitskell | 1994 Tony Blair |

## Trust me, I'm a spin doctor

Unlike Kinnock, or even Major, Blair sported no working-class credentials. Educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh, one of Scotland's foremost schools, he had progressed via St John's College, Oxford, to become a barrister, entering Parliament as MP for Sedgefield in 1983. Like all his generation he was starved of office but had shadowed some key areas, including Treasury and Economic Affairs, Trade and Industry, Energy, Employment and Home Affairs. Just forty, and with a barrister's verbosity, a careerist wife (Cherie), two sons and a daughter, he was a spin doctor's dream.

The modernizers had actually been impatient with Smith (Kavanagh 1997b), and if Blair had a model it was that of Labour's arch-enemy, Margaret Thatcher. Master of the soundbite, he spoke of 'fairness not favours' for the unions, no more 'tax and spend' on the economy and, on Labour's other Achilles' heel, he would be 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime'. In industrial disputes he studiously withheld support from strikers while seeking the confidence of business leaders, even wooing media baron Rupert Murdoch. The mission was to reassure 'middle England'. Blair was even willing to sound a Eurosceptical note.

Perhaps the most symbolic item of Blair's agenda was the rewriting of the venerated Clause Four, which was looking more dated than ever. On 29 April 1995, at a special conference at Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, where seventy-five years earlier the original clause had been adopted, the party voted two-to-one to back reform. The replacement clause called for 'power, wealth

**Table 10.1** The increase in support for the Labour Party, 1992–1996

| Category | 1992 | 1996 |
|---|---|---|
| Members | 279,000 | 400,000 |
| Donors | 3,500 | 71,000 |
| Sponsors | 30,000 | 60,000 |

*Source*: Data from Labour Party NEC reports.

and opportunity to be in the hands of the many not the few', but also extolled the 'enterprise of the market'. Although the unions were only narrowly in favour, the constituency parties gave overwhelming support.

Within a year of Blair taking the helm, party membership had risen by 40,000 and continued to increase (table 10.1), and his own popularity dwarfed that of Major and Ashdown (Dorey 1995: 258). He took a tough line with dissidents at both national and local level. In March 1997 the modernization strategy went a stage further, an historic pre-election deal with the Liberal Democrats promising a referendum on electoral reform.

For critics, 'New Labour' showed more froth than substance. The spin doctors dispensed with ideology to follow the beacon of the opinion polls. At their head was Peter Mandelson (grandson of earlier Labour moderate Herbert (later Lord) Morrison), and Blair's press guru, Alastair Campbell. The acid test arrived in May 1997, but the size of the landslide victory, though suggested by the polls, came as a shock. The Conservatives were entirely banished from the Celtic fringes (figure 10.2). Critics argued that their lemming-like behaviour

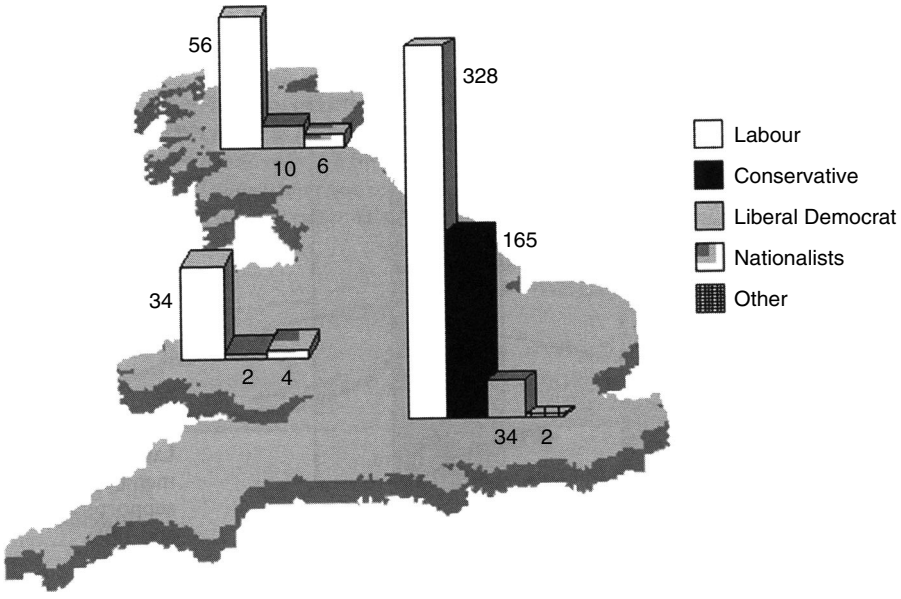



**Figure 10.2** Conservative meltdown: the national distribution of MPs after the 1997 election.

had guaranteed a Labour victory, but Labour's modernizers saw it as an overwhelming endorsement. If symbols were needed they were aplenty. At the 1998 Labour conference, avowedly the last at Blackpool, with its old Labour odour of fish and chips, delegates wore name badges sponsored by a supermarket chain (though some refused), while journalists from the radical magazine *Red Pepper* were banned.

## Meltdown

The Conservatives' worst defeat since 1832 meant the end for Major; within hours hats were in the ring. However, a record seven cabinet ministers had fallen in the election, including heir apparent Michael Portillo. The final ballot was a bitter contest between the young William Hague and the veteran Kenneth Clarke, in which Euroscepticism took precedence over all else (Alderman 1998). As with the Thatcher and Major elections, it was the least-feared candidate who won (p. 326).

Unlike Labour, the Conservatives did not consider the photogenic qualities of their leader. If Blair was a spin doctor's dream, William Hague, with a flat Yorkshire intonation and said to look preternaturally aged, was perhaps a nightmare. At thirty-six he was the youngest leader since Pitt the Younger, his experience confined to junior positions in social security before becoming Welsh Secretary. Educated at a South Yorkshire comprehensive, he had arrived at Oxford University preceded by a *wunderkind* reputation following his schoolboy party conference speech. Effectively a career politician, he had worked as a political adviser and consultant before winning a 1989 by-election in Richmond, North Yorkshire (adjacent to Sedgefield, constituency of another ambitious politician, Tony Blair).

Thus began what some commentators saw as the Conservatives' 'most futile period of opposition in the last one hundred years' (Collings and Seldon 2001: 624). Hague inherited a broken-backed misalliance with a poor showing in

**Table 10.2** The party's over? Attitudes towards the Conservative Party, 1997

| Statement | Percentage of respondents agreeing |
|---|---|
| A party that does not have a bright future | 74 |
| A party with very few new ideas | 84 |
| A party without a clear sense of direction | 75 |
| A party that lacks strong leaders | 81 |
| An out-of-date party | 77 |
| A party that does not look after the interests of ordinary people | 74 |

*Source*: *Gallup Political Index*, October 1997.

**Conservative Party leaders since 1900**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1900 Marquis of Salisbury | 1955 Anthony Eden |
| 1902 Arthur Balfour | 1956 Harold Macmillan |
| 1911 Andrew Bonar Law | 1963 Alec Douglas-Home |
| 1921 Austen Chamberlain | 1965 Edward Heath |
| 1922 Andrew Bonar Law | 1975 Margaret Thatcher |
| 1923 Stanley Baldwin | 1990 John Major |
| 1937 Neville Chamberlain | 1997 William Hague |
| 1940 Winston Churchill | 2001 Iain Duncan Smith |

opinion polls (table 10.2). With some of his backbenchers showing barely disguised derision (*Sunday Times*, 21 Sept. 1997), his chalice contained more hemlock than had Major's. One of the party's key thinkers, David Willetts (1998), argued that they should learn from their previous major defeats in 1906 and 1945 and embrace the new agenda, but Hague was to cling to much of the Thatcher agenda.

## Liberal Democrats: no room in the centre

The Liberal Democrats had enjoyed a string of by-election successes and during the 1992 campaign Ashdown had consistently outscored the other leaders. The party itself rose from 15 per cent in the opening opinion polls to win 17.8 per cent of all votes in the election. Capturing the 'normal' level of third-party support, they remained a serious force, particularly in marginal constituencies (Stevenson 1993: 141). With twenty MPs, a rising membership and a more secure financial position, the party was poised for progress. Further by-election successes provided more cause for optimism. In addition, with two seats in the 1994 elections, there was a breakthrough onto the European stage. (The Greens, with the same percentage of votes, gained none.)

However, Labour's shift had eliminated the vacuum at the centre. Moreover, Labour was raiding their wardrobe as well as that of the Conservatives. Abandoning their policy of 'equidistance', the Liberal Democrats agonized as to how far they should 'snuggle up' to New Labour, as advocated by Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins, the very people who had wanted to break the two-party mould. Perhaps the party had little future except as a home for the disenchanted (Kavanagh 1996: 44). However, the 1997 result produced the biggest third-party breakthrough of post-war history, their forty-six seats promising to become significant should Labour cohesion melt in the heat of internal friction.

## On the fringe

***Nationalists*** The 1992 general election saw nationalist support remaining stable. With four seats Plaid Cymru was one up on 1987 and the Scottish

Nationalists (SNP) maintained their three. A swing of 19 per cent in the Monklands East by-election saw the SNP almost stealing John Smith's old seat. As the Major term progressed, the significance of the Ulster Unionists increased until, just before the 1997 election, they held the balance of power. They were courted not only by Major, but also Blair (*The Times*, 17 Feb. 1997). In 1997, Plaid Cymru held their four seats and the SNP gained another three. However, devolution was to mean a changed climate for the nationalists (see chapter 6).

***Single-issue parties*** Although these are rare in Britain, the strength of Eurosceptic feeling led to the formation of two parties committed to withdrawal from the EU. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) set up in 1993 was initially overshadowed by the Referendum Party of wealthy Eurosceptic businessman Sir James Goldsmith. Money (£20 million) tried very hard to talk as citizens were deluged with material, including video tapes, warning of a European super-state. The party's first conference in October 1996 was adorned by famous figures including actor Edward Fox, who had played an early Eurosceptic, the would-be assassin of General de Gaulle, in *The Day of the Jackal*. Yet despite polling over 800,000 votes, the lack of regional concentration meant a trail of lost deposits for most of the 547 candidates. After Goldsmith's death, the field was left open to UKIP, which absorbed many Referendum activists and built up a membership of almost 10,000. In 1999, with the advent of PR for the European elections, it gained three MEPs, but at the 2001 general election, all but six of its 428 candidates were to lose their deposits.

The Greens mainly made their presence felt as a pressure group, greening the agendas of the main parties. As with UKIP, it was PR that gave them real opportunities for a share in power – two MEPs, one MSP and three Greater London councillors were to carry the green flag.

***The far left and right*** Life was bleak on the far left. Britain's Communist Party had declined since the 1950s, relaunching itself in 1991 as the Democratic Left with some 6,000 members – more a pressure group than a party. Militant Tendency and the Socialist Workers' Party also found little resonance with the New Labour mood. In January 1996, former NUM leader Arthur Scargill severed his Labour connections to form a Socialist Labour Party but gained no seats in 1997. At the other extreme, the BNP caused ripples by winning a council seat in east London, in 1993, and in 2001 it was to gain over 16 per cent of the vote in Oldham.

## From Butskillism to Blatcherism?

Finally back in power, Labour hit the ground running. The Queen's Speech in May 1997 detailed twenty-two bills covering a wide range of policy areas. Its publicity machine spun added gloss around the package and within a year

much legislation had been passed and battalions of task forces were examining numerous other policy options. However, the government had chosen a procrustean bed in its promise to preserve Conservative spending limits. It was certainly unusual for a party to promise to do the same as its opponents! It would be impossible to find a better indication of a return to consensus politics – Thatcherism by other means. The economy would be led by the market, shaped and refined by the state rather than regulated (Gamble and Wright 1997).

The policies were justified variously by reference to Christian values, communitarianism, stakeholding and the 'third way' (see p. 53). Yet New Labour could also be charged with having pursued a Downsian strategy (p. 277) of vote maximization with little regard for principle. The party's old guard, and some left-leaning intellectuals, appeared uneasy with a project that mirrored past 'betrayals' of socialist ideals. However, it could also be argued that New Labour had come to terms with the modern world and would not repeat the mistake of promising much in opposition only to disappoint in office. In a globalizing economy, Blair could argue that debates about the state versus the market were no longer appropriate platforms for economic thinking (Kenny and Smith 1997: 227–8).

Dear Tony, I can scarcely believe I am writing this letter to you.

Opening of Peter Mandelson's resignation letter (Dec. 1998)

***Spinning out of control*** Yet in the midst of his ascendancy Blair was to be reminded of his mortality. It would have been difficult to have imagined a more destabilizing shock than that of December 1998, when the arch-priest of New Labour was brought down. Peter Mandelson had many enemies inside the party as well as without, and revelations that he had failed to disclose a £373,000 loan from a fellow minister, millionaire Geoffrey Robinson, led to the resignation of both, depriving Blair of two icons of the New Labour project; some said that one had invented it and the other paid for it.

However, after a decent interval Blair brought his trusted confidant back, replacing the discredited Mo Mowlam as Northern Ireland Secretary in 1999. However, when Mandelson was forced to go a second time it began to look like carelessness. This time the issue concerned an application for a British passport for Indian millionaire Srichand Hinduja who had donated £1 million to the Millennium Dome project. In January 2001, with a general election looming, Blair was forced to let his accident-prone colleague return again to the back benches (though his informal presence at the high table remained).

Mandelson was a fervent Europhile and his fall allowed Gordon Brown to lay down tough conditions for Britain's entry into the eurozone (see p. 519), a policy area where the rumour mill found much tension between Chancellor and Prime Minister. The unconcealed ambition of the party was to secure a second term and Brown was happy to be characterized as the iron chancellor; his budgetary watchword was always prudence. With rising house prices, buoyant retail sales and low borrowing costs, the economy delivered the feelgood factor for most people. Under Alastair Campbell, the party maintained a generally good relationship with the press, with many ghosted articles from ministers.

Opposition from the left caused little concern, since the key constituency for New Labour was the territory of middle England occupied by 'Mondeo man'. There were, however, occasional alarm bells, as when Blair's speech to the Women's Institute in June 2000 was interrupted by slow hand-clapping. Opponents claimed this to be a significant straw in the wind but they were, indeed, clutching at straws.

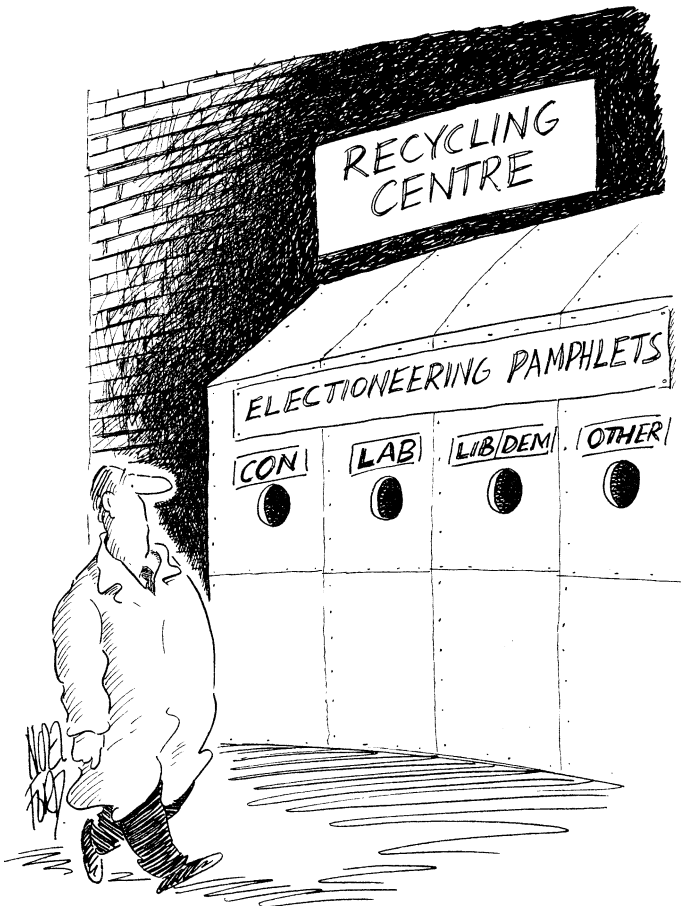
Despite some near scandals over party donations, allegations of cronyism (see p. 588) (Doig 2001) and policy problems in areas such as public transport and the foot-and-mouth crisis, government popularity remained stable throughout the first term at around 48 per cent (compared with 32 per cent for the Conservatives and 16 per cent for the Liberal Democrats). Most striking was the unvaryingly buoyant standing of Blair himself. The Prime Minister thrilled the tabloids by fathering another son, though was embarrassed when his elder son Euan was found drunk in Leicester Square. On the eve of the 2001 general election an *Observer*/ICM poll gave Blair an 18 per cent lead over Hague (50 to 32) on the question 'Who would get the best deal for Britain in Europe?', the one area the Conservative leader had tried to make his own.

***The Liberal Democrats*** Paddy Ashdown had been practising 'constructive opposition' with the goal of a place at the high table of power. However, in January 1999 he stunned his party by announcing his forthcoming retirement. Some believed his decision reflected frustration at a loss of momentum on electoral reform and alliance with Labour, where his ally had been the discredited Mandelson. Charles Kennedy assumed the leadership and there was further cooling in the relationship with Labour.

***Time to call it a day?*** With Blair having so successfully plundered the centre-right wardrobe, the Conservatives could find little to wear. Could the party rebuild its membership base without clearly defined and appealing policies (Peele 1998: 145)? It had been a party of empire but this was gone. It had been a party of the Union but had no MPs in either Wales or Scotland, and devolution was now a bitter pill that could only be swallowed. It had been a party of middle-class values but was now mired in sleaze. It had been a party of constitutional stability but Labour was instigating change on many fronts. In its whiggism and neoliberalism it had been a party of world trade but was now set in opposition to the single currency. Indeed, this was the one area where Hague had positioned the party decisively, with a party referendum in September

**Liberal/Liberal Democrat Party leaders since 1900**

1900 Henry Campbell-Bannerman
1908 Herbert Asquith
1926 David Lloyd George
1931 Herbert Samuel
1935 A. Sinclair
1945 Clement Davies
1956 Jo Grimond
1967 Jeremy Thorpe
1976 David Steel
1988 Paddy Ashdown
1999 Charles Kennedy




1998 ruling out the single currency for two parliaments. If a national referendum were to be held on the euro, the party could split asunder. The last time this had happened was over the Corn Laws in 1846, which had been followed by twenty-seven wilderness years.

## An historic second term

The 2001 general election was delayed until 7 June by the foot-and-mouth crisis, making the campaigns protracted and wearisome. Voters signalled their interest with the lowest turnout since the granting of the universal franchise. However, New Labour was buoyed by the opinion polls and the press (see p. 261). The polls were right, the 413 seats, gained with only 42 per cent of the vote, meant a loss of only six.

It was an appalling night for the Conservatives, who managed to gain one solitary seat, raising their Commons force to 166. They argued that

they had been victims of the very low turnout, but in August the BBC removed this crumb of comfort by publishing a survey of non-voters revealing that, had they gone to the polls, they would have overwhelmingly supported Labour.

The campaign, described by Michael Heseltine as 'extremist and pathetic', had centred largely on Hague's instinctive opposition to entering the eurozone. He had also promised tax reductions, £8-billion cuts in public expenditure, and internment camps for asylum seekers, and had spoken darkly of Britain becoming a foreign land. Critics accused him of bringing racism into the contest and the Liberal Democrats blamed him for racial unrest in some cities. Appearing out of touch on issues such as multiculturalism, marriage and sexual identity, the defeat was a damning verdict on Hague's leadership and he took an immediate decision to resign, securing for himself an unenviable place in history as the first Conservative leader for eighty years not to have been prime minister.

***From Ramsay MacDonald to Ronald McDonald: Labour as a party of government*** Given the party's history, the June 2001 victory was a watershed for Labour and for British politics. Not only was the prized second term secured, it was done in style. Labour appeared to have established itself as a party business could trust, the change symbolized at the September 2001 conference, which displayed the sign of the fast-food chain McDonalds inside the hall. However, this was not the Labour Party of old, and the cost of victory was disenchantment in the old heartlands. Electoral support in the most predominantly working-class areas had fallen by 4 percentage points, while holding up in the middle-class seats (Curtice 2001). At the same time, relations were becoming less harmonious with the trade unions, which were electing more left-wing leaders. The rift was symbolized by John Prescott's decision in 2002, after a lifetime's membership, to leave the RMT in response to demands that he toe the union line in Parliament.

## Liberal Democrats

An *Observer*/ICM poll (*Observer*, 3 June 2001) on the eve of the 2001 election revealed hundreds of thousands prepared to vote tactically to unseat Conservatives where the Liberal Democrats were in second place. In the event, a 2 per cent increase in their vote gave the Liberal Democrats six more seats (bringing their total to fifty-two). Their new leader, Charles Kennedy, was judged to have acquitted himself well and erased a reputation for lethargy.

## Who's for the poisoned chalice? The Tory leadership election

Hague's decision to fall upon his sword was an additional blow for the demoralized party and plunged it into an unwanted leadership contest using an

untried method of election (see p. 326). Within days candidates were marshalling their forces. The most likely heir apparent, Michael Portillo, now back in Parliament, launched his bid with a reception in a glitzy London restaurant. He was joined in the battle by the less than charismatic figures of Iain Duncan Smith, David Davis and Michael Ancram. After much deliberation, the old war horse, Kenneth Clarke, who had languished on the back benches during the Hague regime, joined the race.

With charisma to spare and, despite relative youth, considerable government experience, Portillo exuded an aura of success. With something of Pauline conversion on social policy, a confession of some homosexual experimentation in his youth and a balanced position on Europe, he seemed the man most likely to heal the fatal rift and he began as the tipsters' favourite. However, knives were sharpened as high ambition met low intrigue in the Westminster hothouse. The show of naked ambition, and his style, Spanish ancestry and homosexuality were all cited by his enemies. Those enemies also had friends in the Tory press, which described him as the cannabis and Clause 28 candidate. It was stiletto heels as well as knives when Amanda Platell, Hague's media guru, unveiled her campaign video diary on TV, alleging that Portillo and 'his people' had systematically undermined their fallen leader.

Amidst growing heat, the final ballot on Tuesday 17 July delivered the knockout blow. The two contenders to go before the wider party membership would be Clarke and Duncan Smith. There were strong suspicions that some of the latter's supporters had voted for Clarke to keep Portillo from second place. A shocked Portillo announced his exit from front-line politics. Once again, the 1922 Committee had rejected the candidate most feared by opponents. In the final stages, which involved all party members, things began to get dirty, with two recent leaders attacking each other – Major backing Clarke and Thatcher supporting Duncan Smith. On Thursday 23 August the candidates faced each other in a BBC *Newsnight* debate, but their lacklustre performances made Portillo's rejection all the more poignant.

Victory went to Duncan Smith. It was an extraordinary turn of events; the new leader had been one of the Eurosceptic 'bastards' who had helped make the party unelectable in 1997. In the leadership race Clarke described him as a classic Tory 'hanger and flogger'. Born in 1954, he had joined the party in 1981 and was elected MP for Chingford in 1992, perhaps the natural heir of Norman Tebbit. Indeed, his predecessor was to praise him as a 'normal man', an innuendo to damage Portillo. Son of a Battle of Britain pilot, married to the Hon. Elizabeth Wynne Fremantle, Sandhurst educated and with a military background, he was in social terms a break with the past three leaders. However, his ministerial experience was limited to service as shadow social security secretary during 1997–9.

The new leader's first party conference in October 2001 was overshadowed by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. After the humiliating electoral defeat it would have been a low-key affair anyway. Yet, despite his hard right reputation, his message was that the party must cast off the shroud of Thatcherism. Ironically, he sought to paint the party as one with a place for all

races, sexes, religions and sexual orientation – very much the agenda of the vanquished Portillo.

## Evaluating Two-party Democracy

Under the influence of the first-past-the-post electoral system, a broadly **bi-partisan** politics has evolved in Britain, held by apologists to have features peculiarly favourable to democracy and contrasted with West European multi-partism. Much writing has extolled virtues such as strong single-party government and alternation of governments in office. Yet these virtuous features can be subject to sceptical review.

### The party system in Parliament

The fact that two parties dominate Parliament does not mean that single-party government has invariably been the case. During the twentieth century, Britain experienced some twenty-one years of rule by a combination of parties (see p. 262). Moreover, there have been periods when a governing party has lacked an absolute majority, being sustained only by an agreement with another party; as recently as 1997, Major needed Ulster Unionist support.

The notion that two-partyism produces frequent alternation in office is also unconvincing. Even in the post-war era the Conservatives sustained the claim to be the natural party of government, with the lion's share of office (see figure 9.7). The Labour Party has held office since 1997 and can be expected to make a strong play to continue for a third term. Moreover, the growing strength of the Liberal Democrats since 1997 questions the two-party model itself.

### The parties in the country

Looking beyond Westminster, there is even less evidence of a two-party culture. Since the 1970s, the memberships of the centre parties have been by no means inconsequential. They also contain some of the most enthusiastic workers, the Liberal Democrats bringing local activism back into fashion. In terms of electoral support, ever since the emergence of Labour there has been a greater party diversity in the country than at Westminster. Not until the immediate post-war decades did Labour and Conservatives begin to carve up the popular vote, and the period was brought to an end with a groundswell of support for the nationalists and centre parties. In 1983 and 1987 the Alliance polled around a quarter of the total votes, slightly less than Labour (28 and 30 per cent, respectively) and over half the number polled by the victorious Conservatives. Another measure of party support is local government, where during the 1980s and 1990s the 'third party' became second to Labour.

The bipartisan nature of Parliament has been in large measure a distortion produced by the electoral system. If Labour honours its pledge for a referendum on electoral reform for Westminster, Britain could come to an historical watershed; this is one of the most significant constitutional issues since 1832. Parties waiting in the wings would hear their cue, soliloquies and dialogues perhaps giving way to turbulent crowd scenes and a rather more colourful *dramatis personae*.

## Key points

- A political party is an association formed for the purpose of taking power by constitutional means.
- Although parties often claim to reflect ideologies, the quest for electoral support weakens this link.
- The early British parties were parliamentary cadres.
- Modern parties are *mass* organizations, with thousands of members.
- The first mass parties emerged as a result of franchise extensions.
- The Labour Party was established in 1900 by a merging of the trade unions and certain socialist groups. It was not intended to be a revolutionary party.
- The post-war party system has seen an era of consensus; the cracking of the consensus; the rise of a new centre party and the emergence of a new consensus in many policy areas in the 1990s.
- The view that Britain has a two-party system is simplistic. The two main parties have not shared office equally, and in the country, voting patterns do not mirror the polarization found in Parliament.
- The electoral system is a key factor in creating the two-party system, and a change to PR could be expected to make a difference.

## Review your understanding of the following terms and concepts

1922 Committee
adversary politics
bipartisan politics
Black Wednesday
cadre party
consensus
Eurosceptic
Fabianism
fringe party
Gang of Four
mass party
Militant Tendency
minority government
multi-party system
Night of the Long Knives
party system
Profumo scandal
registration society
single-issue party
single-party system
sleaze
Tory
two-party system
Whig
'winter of discontent'

## Assignment

Study the extract from *Politics* and answer the following questions.

| | | Mark (%) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | What is 'Old Labour'? | 25 |
| 2 | 'Our values do not change. Our commitment to a different vision of society stands intact. But the ways of achieving that vision must change' (Tony Blair). Discuss. | 50 |
| 3 | Does New Labour put vote maximization before all else? | 25 |

### What's new about 'New Labour'?

. . . Essentially there is nothing new about New Labour. . . . That is, the continuities between it and so-called 'Old Labour' are more significant than the cleavages between the two. Times have changed and British social democracy perceived that it needed to modernise itself to catch up with these 'new times'. . . . Perhaps one quote from Blair is sufficient to illustrate this: 'Our values do not change. Our commitment to a different vision of society stands intact. But the ways of achieving that vision must change. The programme we are in the process of constructing entirely reflects our values. Its objectives would be instantly recognisable to our founders . . . ' So the 'arch-modernisers' also emphasise continuities. What is it then, according to them, that makes it different to 'Old Labour'? There is the obvious 'modernisation' element. . . . However, there is also the question of *which* 'Old Labour' they are comparing themselves with? If it is the founders of the party and the 1945 Labour government, they cite continuities. However, if it is the corporatism of Wilson and Callaghan . . . or the [Bennite period up to the early 1980s] then they are very keen indeed to put as much distance as possible between New Labour and Old.

Extract from Paul Allender, 'What's new about "New Labour"?' *Politics*, Vol. 21(1), 2001, pp. 56–62.

## Questions for discussion

1 Explain the concept of 'party system'. How would you characterize that of Britain?
2 What did Disraeli mean when he spoke of Peel stealing the clothes of the Whigs?

3 Identify the factors that led to Labour supplanting the Liberals as the main challenger to the Conservatives.
4 'The first-past-the-post electoral system will defeat any attempt to establish multi-party politics in Britain.' Examine this statement in the light of developments since the 1980s.
5 Examine the effects of the two world wars on the evolution of the Labour Party.
6 Explain the reasons for the era of party consensus following the second world war.
7 Account for the breakdown in the post-war consensus.
8 How radical was Blair's modernization of the Labour Party?
9 Have the Labour victories of 1997 and 2001 marked a new age of consensus politics?
10 'What if?' Give an account of British politics since 1997 as if the Conservatives had won the election.

## Topic for debate

This house believes history shows that a socialist party can never expect power in Britain.

## Further reading

Barrett Brown, M. (2001) *The Captive Party: How Labour was Taken Over by Capital.*
Critique of New Labour and its new friends.

Blake, R. (1998) *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher.*
Latest version of classic text.

Crewe, I. and King, A. (1997) *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party.*
The life and times of the 'Gang of Four'. Explores the role of personalities, rivalries and non-rational factors in the destiny of parties. A large book about a small party!

Kavanagh, D. (1997) *The Reordering of British Politics: Politics after Thatcher.*
A clear mapping of the shifting sands of post-Thatcher politics.

Ludlum, S. and Smith. M. (eds) (2001) *New Labour in Government.*
Examines Labour's modernization project and its link with 'old Labour'.

MacIver, D. (ed.) (1996) *The Liberal Democrats.*
With contributions from academics and party members, this helps fill a gap in the analysis of British parties.

Norton, P. (ed.) (1996) *The Conservative Party.*
Essays by academics and a Conservative MP. Editor's opening chapter probes deeper philosophical grounding.

Pelling, H. and Reid, A. J. (1997) *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 11th edn.
Economical account of the rise of the party with clear narrative.

Rawnsley, A. (2000) *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour.*
By an astute political journalist. A story those inside might have preferred not told.

Shaw, E. (1996) *The Labour Party since 1945: Old Labour, New Labour.*
Balanced assessment of post-war Labour governments and their commitment to social democracy. Objectively critical of New Labour.

Toynbee, P. and Walker, D. (2001) *Did Things Get Better? An Audit of Labour's Successes and Failures*.
Title says it all. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Wilson, T. (1966) *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935*.
Probes a key event in modern history.

### *For light relief*

Julian Critchley, *A Bag of Boiled Sweets*.
This autobiography from a perennial backbencher is also a social history of the Conservative Party.

George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*.
Reveals apparent calm of Edwardian England as a facade concealing seething forces leading towards civil war.

Liz Davies, *Through the Looking Glass: A Dissenter Inside New Labour.*
Old Labour strikes back. One-time member of Labour's NEC, Liz Davies chronicles her bleak experiences amidst 'control freakery' and skulduggery.

Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or: the Two Nations*.
Celebrates the ideas of Disraeli's Toryism; a romance with a Chartist background.

David Hare, *Absence of War.*
Play showing the trials and frustrations of a Labour leader. Said to be based on Kinnock experience.

*Scandal.*
Video/film of the Profumo affair.

Simon Walters, *Tory Wars: Conservatives in Crisis*.
A light-hearted and entertaining read, packed with inside information exposing the internal machinations, dirty tricks and bitter enmities within a party that some believe may be in its death throes.

## On the net

http://www.conservative-party.org.uk
http://www.libdem.org.uk
http://www.labour.org.uk
In addition to current organization and policies, these sites include considerable historical information. Use a search engine or some of the academic political resources sites to track down information on numerous smaller parties.