

How contemporary politics became trapped in the short term and whether it can be repaired

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Ian Marsh argues that policy convergence, cynical marketing strategies and the demise of party organisations have destroyed the infrastructures that once provided a platform for longer term policy debates. Contemporary politics is trapped in short-termism and parties may never be able to recover.



A wide literature attests to public disenchantment with contemporary democracy. So what is to be done? Most current attention focuses on party reform or voting system change. Both are desirable. But do they get to the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem is the short term cage in which contemporary politics is trapped. This is the unintended consequence of a series of developments that have accumulated over several decades: on one hand, three slow-burning and underlying structural changes; and on the other, the marketing strategies of the major parties. First, the structural changes.

Hollowed out parties: The major political parties are now empty vessels. In another image, they are hollowed-out shells of their once-mighty selves. Take away their official supports – their places in parliament, official cars, publicly funded staff, acolytes and valets – all the trappings and panoply of government and opposition – and their appearance of solidity would be like the Emperor’s new clothes – an illusion. Without the backdrop of state buildings, state servants, the aura of state institutions and state power, the major political parties would be largely naked, empty forms. Their memberships are relatively tiny, without passion and unrepresentative – their conferences are stage managed – their platforms are mostly vacuous.

Party convergence: Not only have their organisations contracted, but the major parties have also converged. They barely differ on underlying domestic economic strategies. The Conservatives post 1979 and the Labour Party post 1997 both embraced neoliberalism. Despite the Global Financial Crisis, the broad lines of this approach continue. An activist state has been repudiated. Alternatives (like Lord Heseltine’s report to the Conservatives, IRPP work on innovation strategies, and Vince Cable’s parallel proposals for the Lib-Dems) are sidelined. There is no influential public setting where such alternatives could be debated. Party conferences have long since lost this role.

Pluralised Publics: A third big change involves public attitudes. The emergence of the new social movements in the late 1960s and beyond has transfigured political identities. Whereas class had hitherto constituted the principal political cleavage, an array of new environmental, gender and rights issues then emerged. The major movements of the 1970s – covering the environment, women’s rights, gay rights, indigenous rights, ethnic rights, animal rights, consumer rights and peace – stimulated the formation of conservative counter movements, all of which served to further pluralise and differentiate citizen identities and to weaken ties to the former occupation or class based parties.

Major Party Marketing Strategies: These three structural developments created a fresh marketing challenge. In seeking to retain their public appeal, the major parties have adopted a similar strategy: celebrity leadership, a relentless marketing orientation, focus-group driven policy and above all devotion to winning each twenty-four hour news cycle. In combination these approaches have not only corrupted the political conversation, they have also trapped party elites in a short term cage. The major parties have created their very own Frankenstein monster. Policy convergence and the demise of party organisations have destroyed the infrastructures that once provided a platform for longer term policy debates. Political leaders must sometimes confront their publics – but mostly they need to work with the grain of public opinion. The infrastructure and the platforms once that linked party elites and their publics around an emerging agenda has progressively dissolved.

What is to be done?

The story of democratic decline is one of a political world that is increasingly, and without deliberate design, trapped in the short term. Capacities for social learning, once embedded specifically in the mass party organisations, have leached away. Organisational linkage has been replaced by the media, which prioritises immediate not reflective engagements.

But can political parties recover encompassing representational and agenda setting capabilities? They cannot.

The mass parties gained their social base and their reach from the development of social class as the salient form of identity. Social class continues to be very important, but it is now cross-cut by a variety of other allegiances. On many questions (e.g. gender, ethnicity, family life, the environment, and international obligations) orientations have long since ceased to be simply or largely a function of class identity. Further, at an ideal level, there are no encompassing ideologies that could provide the rationale for the recovery of something resembling mass party mobilisation. Socialism and communism have left the political stage – and other candidates such as feminism or green theory seem too sectional and/or too far from the mainstream.

So how might agenda setting and interest aggregation be renewed and links between citizens and the formal system deepened? In effect, this requires an analogue of the older party conferences and other party agenda setting processes, but now constructed around single issues. Any new political and policy making architecture would need to demonstrate a capacity to intervene influentially at the strategic or agenda entry end of the public conversation. It would need to influence (reciprocally) the attitudes and orientations of interest groups, social movements and other protagonists. It would need to engage the media at an earlier point in the policy cycle. And by all these and other means it would need to seed the development of broader public opinion.

If political parties can no longer undertake these tasks, a next step might be to look at institutions that anchored roughly analogous roles in other phases of political development – in particular in the more plural (but less democratic) world that preceded the rise of collectivist politics. In the nineteenth century, committees of the legislature, helped set the political agenda, mediate the development of public opinion and engage interests. [Oliver MacDonagh has described](#) (p.6) how this worked in practice in terms that almost exactly match the needs identified here:

After 1820...Select Committees were used with a regularity and purpose quite without precedent. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this development. Through session after session, through hundreds of inquiries and the examination of many thousands of witnesses a vast mass of information and statistics was being assembled. Even where (as was uncommonly the case) the official enquiry was in the hands of unscrupulous partisans, a sort of informal adversary system usually led to the enlargement of true knowledge in the end. A session or two later the counter-partisans would secure a counter exposition of their own. All this enabled the administration to act with a confidence, a perspective and a breadth of vision which had never hitherto existed. It had also a profound secular effect on public opinion generally and upon parliamentary public opinion in particular. For the exposure of the actual state of things in particular fields was in the long run probably the most fruitful source of reform in nineteenth century England.

Of course this world of restricted voting rights, virtual representation and more independent members was vastly different from a pluralised twenty-first century democracy. If committees were now to assume analogous roles, a variety of political, cultural and institutional changes would need to occur. At a political level, a weakening of party discipline would seem to be essential. Voting reform and/or multi-party politics are doubtless preconditions for such a development. A more democratic upper house could create an alternative (or supplementary) site for committee infrastructure. At a cultural level, the notion that major emerging issues should first be exposed in a transparent

setting and before decisions are taken by the executive would confound many present assumptions and conventions. These many obstacles cannot be understated.

On the other hand, public disaffection, should it continue on the present scale and even expand, will create strong perhaps irresistible pressures. The present formal structure of power emerged in the early twentieth century. It was designed for this wholly different social moment, the collectivisation of political life. The present social trajectory is wholly in the opposite direction – the dynamic is differentiating and pluralising. Voter disaffection may thus slowly but progressively ‘enforce’ awareness of a need for change amongst political elites.

And a third consideration concerns alternatives. If linkage is not to be achieved through mass based parties, what other tissue might create the necessary connections between the formal system and its publics? In the development of public opinion, what other institution could anchor a move towards more considered and reflective social learning? A rampant populism abetted by focus group politics, the marketing model and a 24-hour media cycle is surely profoundly corrupting – and its presence can only be curtailed if an equally potent countervailing infrastructure – one that can facilitate social learning – is appropriately embedded in the formal structure of power.

But the primary challenge is to political imagination. Is the thought that some formal powers of policy making might be shared between ministers and committees incredible? Is the idea that committees might be a platform for new patterns of linkage between the formal political system and its publics unthinkable? Is a vision of parliament as again an arena for informed deliberation, and thus a springboard for wider social learning, fanciful? Such a world was imaged in the MacDonagh quotation that was cited earlier.

Is some hybrid version – made up of weaker parties, a more transparent executive and a considerably enhanced role for parliament and its committees – a design for twenty-first century politics?

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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