IS the PARTY OVER?

The major parties, we are told, are 'on the nose'. The old left parties are in decline. Is the political party as we've known it in the Twentieth Century an anachronism? Sarah Benton, writing from Britain, thinks it is.

The political party as we have known it is an anachronism. Out of all the tasks it is set there are only two it can carry out with any adequacy: it can contest elections and it can produce a caste of professional politicians to take part in the ritual of public affairs. People have expected so much more.

But the party can rarely enforce democracy in government or civil life; where "the private" advances, so the party's control of the state recedes. It does not usually emancipate its individual members; it is not a means through which people can exercise more choice in their lives or more control over their lives. It is not an "authentic" voice of the people; the most common view of party politicians is that they lie. Far from standing for democracy, for most people, the political party represents ritual tedium for the masses who at worst fear they are subjected to the professional exclusivity, fanaticism and manipulation of the few. It is not surprising that political parties of the old sort are in decline all over Europe and North America. Only those that have changed their ways face the future with anticipation.

The "old parties" are those that were established by the 1920s. They differed from each other in ideology and social composition but they were all a response to two phenomena: the advent of the mass vote and the emergence of the all-powerful nation state. Each of these - the state and the mass vote - shaped the development of the other through the medium of the party. The pace-makers were the mass parties with a formal ideology of socialism - including the fascists of Italy and the Nazis of Germany, both of which began with, at least, a rhetoric of power to the masses via the state as, of course, did the communist parties.

Unlike the upper class, with its access to many forms of power through the army (Prussia in particular), church (Italy), land (most of Eastern Europe), and business (Britain, Germany, USA) both the professional middle class and the then huge working class had access to power only through the state. Unlike the upper class, their only access to the state was through the party. The development of systems of mass production, especially in the USA, Germany and Britain, also shaped the mass vote and produced the potent imagery of the working class as a single, dynamic whole.

Even those who were dismayed by the dawn of the party age, noted the exciting power of mass politics. "All is hurry and agitation; night is used for travel, day for business, even 'holiday trips' have become a strain on the nervous system. Important political, industrial and financial crises carry excitement into far wider circles of people than they used to do; political life is engaged in quite generally: political, religious and social struggles, party-politics, electioneering, and the enormous spread of trade unionism inflame tempers, place an ever greater strain on the mind, and encroach upon the hours for recreation, sleep and rest." (This is Freud in 1893, quoting a contemporary in 'Civilised Sexual Morality'.)

The catastrophic failure of capitalism after the first world war ensured that the mass parties represented the best claim to manage the future. With the dereliction of mass unemployment, only a greatly enlarged role for the state could produce balance, stability and social equity. To socialists of all sorts this was so obvious it was just common sense. Where social democrats diverged from communists and fascists was in their pursuit of a state that would be invulnerable to demagogues and the mob.

It was their parties that took the lead in shaping modern politics. In the name of delivering power to the people, socialist parties from the 1930s and particularly after the second world war treated politics as a profession and reforming society as a matter of good management. The crunch came in the 1950s; those governments which had ceded fewest political rights in civil society, for workers or consumers for instance, found themselves the most stultified. They produced a form of government...
which cannot regenerate its own political drive, whether it was the Soviet Union’s “era of stagnation” or Britain’s Labour Party.

Today’s Right is quite right to recognise that an era was ending in the 1960s. Before 1950, it was still possible to conceive of the political party as the “modern prince”, modern because the collective agency of party had superseded the mediaeval individual leader, but a prince nonetheless, an heroic entity. This romantic conception of party endured until the 1960s; it nestled even in the most prosaic bosom of British Labour. For instance, Francis Williams, a true Labour loyalist, friend of Clem Attlee and former editor of the Daily Herald, describes the birth of the Labour Party (Fifty Years March, The Rise Of The Labour Party) in this way: “And now, on that February morning in 1900, the curtain was rising on a new act in this tremendous drama...” And: “The Party born on that grey February day in a drab commercial street off Fleet Street was to... mobilise behind it and become the chief instrument of a political uprising of the working classes of Britain that was to change the social and economic face of the country out of all recognition...” This hero would go on to carry through “a programme which would have seemed the wildest and most revolutionary utopianism to those passing along Farringdon Street about their ordinary business on that February day in the first year of the new century”.

Romantic? Undoubtedly. Francis Williams was writing in 1950. A dip into any account of politics between 1890 and 1920 will come up with even more stirring stuff. Thus (and quite randomly), a Mr. Pickles urging political unity at the Co-operative Movement in 1917: “I am attending meetings one night as a socialist, another as a trade unionist, and another as a member of a co-operative board, but I am working for democracy in sections... Let us put all our cards on the table, stand together, and go forward for democracy - (applause) - triumphant democracy”. His rallying cry was for party unity, but he spoke too for the unity of the masses who made the party. The hero of modernist imagery in the 1920s and 1930s was, if not the mass itself, an anonymous worker, individual in statuesque form but not in character.

Like a prince of old, the party demanded loyalty, inspired love and devotion, promised delivery from evil, fought battles on behalf of the needy, brought nobility into the grey, drab lives of the many. Because it was a collective, it also exacted discipline and demanded sacrifice. It would not have been heroic had it not. (The forms and imagery of the military were never very far away either.) And if the party was a heroic warrior, so, too, were the people. The party was the people, they and it were a single whole.

Nobody today regards the party in this way. Lingering romantics see it as having been “corrupted” by power or betrayed by weak, susceptible men while the working class retains its character as a martyred unity. For others, the loss of illusion is just part of the modern condition. The loss of faith is in the party, in the state, in politics itself - and in the masses. To read today the futurists quoted by Marshall Berman (All That Is Solid): “We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals”, is to know we live in a different era.

Today we do not believe that the mass can be made into a single, heroic whole by a political party. As Marshall Berman notes, a distinctive feature of today’s modernity is the sense of fragmentation, accompanied by a generalised loss of meaning. The “new times” argued by Stuart Hall (ALR 108) are characterised thus: “greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption”. Not only is the whole fragmented, so is the “self” too. The Co-op’s Mr. Pickles in 1917 perhaps felt the same; unlike us with our
kaleidoscopic selves, he felt all could be made whole by the party. He felt his individual, sensate self should be lost in the party surge to democracy.

Our conceptions of party have not been brought into line with this new reality of multiple selves who can no longer be marshalled into one mass party with a single aim: to win control of an all-embracing state. The attempts by party leaders to reshape their parties as both professional elites and purveyors of popular political culture are jagged with these contradictions. Here the crisis of purpose runs deep. What are all those members for? If party members are the cadres of a political mission, what exactly is that mission? For the old form of party is an anachronism not only because it’s the wrong shape, not only because we no longer come in just two or three classes, but because so much power has been shifted out of the state machinery which the party was shaped to control.

The desultory connections of people, party, parliament and state are common to many countries. They are testament to the disappearance of power; like the Scarlet Pimpernel, political power no longer has a fixed, visible locus. It is not found firmly in the state and certainly not in the parliament; it is not tucked in the back pockets of M15 pursuing its paranoid fantasies through our keyholes nor is it filed in the cabinets of Luxembourg or Brussels. It is not floating in a silicon valley or sitting snugly in the IMF, the Group of 7, the headquarters of Coca Cola, among Italian freemasons circling the Vatican or in the safe of a mighty arms manufacturer. It’s in all those places and none, here, there and nowhere. There is no single citadel to be captured, no commanding height which, once scaled, gives a political party power over the civic universe. As the fragments of power swirl frustratingly in and out of vision, conspiracy theories multiply. Many of them are correct; there are indeed conspiracies hatched and carried out by private companies, shady net-works of military and commercial interests, the state’s secret underworld. Some do considerable damage; all are anti-democratic. Never dismiss a good conspiracy when one is hauled into the daylight. But do not either attribute to it a Boy’s Own capacity to rule the world through its secretly acquired powers. The world’s not like that.

If political power cannot be delivered by simple control over the nation state, then the form and functions of parties, designed to win such control, have to change if they are to survive.

It is for this reason, as much as changing sociologies of class relations, that the Conservatives in Britain have been the dominant power this decade. Their rhetoric of rolling back the frontiers of the state is an acknowledgment of the limits of the nation state in today’s conjunction of economic and political power. This is not because the Thatcherites were immensely more percipient than the socialists; rather it was because the Conservatives have never been so dependent on state powers to get what they want. They have thus had a freedom of manoeuvre in a changing world which parties of the Left have not enjoyed. The fact that much which constitutes “Thatcherism” has been, like earlier Conservative eras, an ad hoc response to circumstances is clear. In Popular Capitalism, John Redwood, a tipped-for-the-top British Tory MP who worked in Thatcher’s policy unit, describes how accidentally they arrived at privatisation. The strategy that became the driving force of Thatcherism was not planned but stumbled upon.

Parties in other countries have followed suit, though much less wholeheartedly. The crisis for British left parties has been far more acute both because the economic problems which the nation state is expected to solve have been more grave for much longer; and also because of the peculiar role of trade unions in Britain. In no other country have unions, party and state been tied together so intractably in what became a deadening mission to create a bureaucratic corporate state.

At the time it seemed to be a juggernaut that could not be diverted. Hence, what seems like the overkill of Thatcherism in severing those links. For Labour, the consequences have been near-fatal. Because that alliance was dominated by a peculiarly British labourist/corporate view of political power, the Labour establishment was also less flexible, less responsive to both external circumstances and to nudges for change that came from below. For it should not be forgotten that criticisms of Labour’s dependence on a bureaucratic state and undemocratic union leaderships came first from the left.

In the 1980s, the political party became a magnet for the movement which had developed out of the ‘60s and ‘70s. This is a comment on the limits of movements, a pointer to what parties alone can deliver.

Unlike the party, harnessed to the needs of the state, the movement was truly “modern”. It rejected class as a determinant of individual political choice. It sought to eliminate the gap between personal feeling and public action. The liberation of the political actors was as important as, if not more important than, the conquest of opponents. The movement rejected institutions for itself, as these would tend to freeze political positions and embed conflicts to win control. It upheld direct action both as a form of self-expression and as more effective than formal political procedures. The movement was oriented towards action, but changing culture and attitudes were goals as legitimate as law reform. Its modernism lay in its rejection of the idea that there is a single oppressed people or a single source of authority to be undermined, or of power to be captured.

Most of these ideas were common to the Black movement, the women’s movement, the gay movement and, later, the green and peace movements
and, to a limited extent, those disabled by injury, illness or addiction. They have in common the fact that their potential membership is circumscribed, and their goals are not universal. In this, they differ from parties.

Nationalist movements, now so powerful as the agency against Communist Party *ancien régime* differ again. Though they share the emphasis on culture and speak the language of liberation and radical change, they have powerful roots in old traditions of masculinity, land and family honour all of which bind together dominant racial communities. They look backwards to an old brotherhood as well as forward to a new democracy. Apart from the greens, only nationalist movements have produced national parties and, unlike the greens, they alone claim to speak for the whole people, rather than acting as an avant garde to advance a minority view.

Green parties in all countries have attempted to be "parties of a new type" and to a considerable extent they have succeeded. Their structures are much looser and, in particular, they acknowledge the "person" in politics. Like movements, green parties expect individual members to embody political principles in their personal life.

These trends are a direct result of the movement ethos, which sought to dissolve the barrier between public and private principles. There is the same stress on authenticity; only that which comes direct from the self, the author, has validity. The British SDP, in its early days when feminism was a strong influence, demonstrated its modernity by establishing "networks" to encourage women's participation. But, in opposition to the Liberals especially, it also raged against "old-fashioned" sloppiness. New practices were designed as much to create a professional elite as to dissolve the gulf between professional and amateur in politics. The requirements of power and the exigencies of size both count against new forms. The larger and more established the West German Greens have become, the harder it has been for them to maintain their ethos of an open democracy.

We should not be romantic about movements. Many of those we still refer to as the "new movements", as representing the spirit of a new age, have lost their elan and cohesion. Their values survive and networks have proved resilient. But the mood is of consolidation and solace, rather than advance.

There have been successes. All the "new" movements achieved lasting changes in awareness. They have been truly liberating. They have changed the lives of the direct participants and of those around them. They have given a political voice to those who would otherwise be silent. They have all challenged the conventions of politics. Movements have been the main agents in exposing the anachronistic structures of party politics.

Parties are not, of course, going to wither away. How, then, can the party be changed so that it is a positive agent for freedom and democracy? How can parties both aim to win state power and act independently of the state, as voices of the people?

We must first accept a limited role for government and the state. The most we can ask of a state is that it lays down the essential standards of free and fair treatment on which civilised life depends. In actuality, that is a lot more than the nation state or transnational institutions do at the moment.

If the potential of the state as an initiator of progress is less, then there has to be a corresponding increase in the self-activity of our multiple selves in civil society. We all have to imagine how things ought to be run in ways that keep open democratic channels without requiring compulsory attendance at weekly meetings. How can the health service be made responsive to its clients? The bus service? The railways? How can a local community get its streets cleaned when and how it wants? How do we balance the rights of street-cleaners with the rights of street-users?

This is the issue of political leadership and, for labour parties, it means a different relationship with the parliamentary sphere. Instead of seeing it as the apex of the pyramid, it should be just one wing of the party. Forms of political power outside parliament need more energy devoted to them. This will be increasingly true if the party is serious about decentralisation.

As we have learned from movements, people will begin to form political groups as a need arises. The party should not seek to take these over, as communists have done, institutionalise them - or ignore them, as was labour's way. Rather, it must be able to bring together temporary alliances of interest groups which may well feel themselves to be in conflict. This will mean co-operation with other parties on specific issues and values.

Too often, parties of the left are perceived as dogmatic and exclusive, rewarding only those they agree with. The party must be the principal defender of democratic channels for everyone. Through this, it can be the defender of civil society against the authoritarianism of the state.

In short, the old relationship of homogeneous state and class, which created the mass political party of reform, no longer exists. But the very fragmentation of society creates a need for clear political leadership; the alternative is a drift towards popular and governmental authoritarianism to stave off "things falling apart". The creation of a political form that can provide that leadership, as well as the promotion of civil political activity, independent of the state, are the two overriding needs.

SARAH BENTON is a journalist for the British news and comment weekly *New Statesman and Society*. This is a condensed version of an article that was originally published in *Marxism Today*. 