

PRELIMINARY DRAFT – Not for quotation or citation

“Liberal Revival, Prospects and Policies”

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### British Party Politics After Tony Blair

American politics, especially at the national level, is focused on the head of party who temporarily occupies the White House. Party organizations, at local and state as well as national levels, have faded steadily in strength and influence. In Britain, party structure and also philosophy for the Conservative and Labour partisans remain important components of political life. Given this state of affairs, how important in fact is a transition from a Tony Blair to a Gordon Brown?

The Liberal Democratic Party is useful for analysis of the degree to which there is continuity, as the paragraph just above implies, and change in the British system. In modern times, the party undeniably has been distinctive in philosophy, as well as frustrated in efforts dramatically to broaden electoral appeal. The earlier Liberal Party, a consistently powerful and at times dominant force in 19<sup>th</sup> century British politics, has with successor parties been a minor force throughout most of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Yet the party has not died, and in the past several decades has become notably stronger, in local government as well as in Parliament.

To what extent does this have implications for the evolution of the wider political system? Do the Liberal Democrats provide any special insight into how the system might evolve after the lengthy tenure of Prime Minister Tony Blair? With the qualities of the political system in mind, is Menzies Campbell likely to fare any better than predecessors in the struggle to increase M.P.s and perhaps participate in a coalition government? This seems a more profitable approach than speculating on how the party in very pragmatic terms might find specific political openings, electoral advantage in particular constituencies, or perhaps expanded media visibility as a result of a Brown rather than Blair government.

### The Bases of British Activism: Implicit Ideas, Explicit Ideologies

Following the insightful theoretical framework developed by Professor Samuel H. Beer, British politics from the early decades of the twentieth century has been dominated by disciplined and well-organized national parties and interest groups. The coming of what he terms the Collectivist Age can be described as solidification, and to some extent regimentation, of British politics. Sociologically, the growth of collectivist politics was founded on a new communalism in the electorate. Class-based voting led to an electoral predictability, and party competition increased in intensity, reflecting the political importance of class sentiments. Organizationally, the new calculus of large national interest groups working in tandem with big administrative bureaucracy was reinforced by a new party discipline that limited the powers of the parliamentary rank and file.

Very different were the weaker and more informal party organizations that were defining characteristics of the Liberal Age of the nineteenth century. The theme of parliamentarism, where M.P.s were free of modern party discipline in forming shifting majorities, based on particular issues, has inevitably increased the importance of Parliament, or at least of the House of Commons, the primary body. The fading of the freedom for maneuver of parliamentarism implies discipline and therefore control of

M.P.s. The loss of earlier independence compromised the freedom and importance of the representative.

One crucial legislative power is that of control over the nation's budget. In English history, this was a central source of tension between Crown and Parliament, and taxing power has been a main source of leverage and influence enjoyed by the House of Commons. The degree to which the growth of Cabinet and Prime Ministerial power has reduced this and other powers of the Commons is striking. Consider the remark of Alfred Grosser, made in the context of his study of the budgetary powers of modern Western legislatures: "The Congress of the United States would be at the top... At the bottom of the ladder would be the House of Commons, whose lack of power is striking once the Chancellor of the Exchequer has revealed his budget to the public."<sup>1</sup>

The decline of the role of Parliament has been complemented by the growth of power elsewhere – in the centrally important Cabinet, and in the expanding national bureaucracy to deal with the planning of the economy and the program of the welfare state. A large-scale, technically competent administration is essential to provide informed preparation, and staff work for decision. In part, the greater difficulty of decision making is a result of the larger variety of economic interest groups that have access to the instruments of government. It is also a reflection, however, of the growth of new levels of government activity in the economic planning and welfare areas at a time when technology has made all decisions more complex.

#### Collectivist Paradox and Problems

No decision-making structure is entirely perfect, since the very effort to solve some problems tends to create others. One need not devote intense study to G.W.F. Hegel or Karl Marx, but simply address the difficulties of daily life, to see and appreciate this conclusion. Several very significant difficulties have resulted from collectivist administrative structures. First, there is the broad administrative paradox that efforts to create competence through building bureaucracies can undermine that very goal. Second, there is the central/local problem that decisions that seem eminently rational from the perspective of a central planner may nevertheless arouse hostility within particular localities, where costs and benefits are viewed differently. Finally, there is the universality/selectivity problem of how to aid economically peripheral groups.

The mechanics of collectivism have required the spawning of a very large bureaucracy, but as a variety of analysts have argued, such an approach tends to be self-defeating. There is clear sensitivity to this problem in the reflections of one of bureaucracy's most influential students, Max Weber. He wrote that, "Bureaucratic administration always tends to be an administration of 'secret sessions'; in so far as it can, it hides its knowledge and actions from criticism."<sup>2</sup> The technical expertise of administrators counters efforts at outside supervision.

This is an especially telling factor in the British situation, where Parliament lacks sufficient standing committees and staff competence of the sort that give the U.S. Congress leverage over the executive branch of government. A poorly informed Parliament, moreover, can be an ideal aid in helping bureaucracy maintain independence. The attempt to supervise can encourage a misleading sense of complacency among legislators and critics of bureaucracy, while masking the inability of the political sector really to control decisions.

Outsiders may try to impose external political and policy goals on the bureaucracy. However, the bureaucracy, as a spender of money, consumer of other resources and home for careers inevitably develops a separate political outlook, separate interests, and a competitive incentive to resist control.

Related to the problem of controlling bureaucratic independence is a more paradoxical issue. Aside from the independence that expertise provides and the development of internal bureaucratic political interests, the very effort to structure administrative rationality can prove counterproductive, and nearly every such initiative has this dimension. Michel Crozier wrote of the “vicious circle” of bureaucracy. He divides the paradox into four qualities typical of large administrations: (1) development of impersonal rules, which become too rigid and too simple; (2) isolation of different strata and a concomitant group pressure on the individual for conformity; (3) centralization of decisions, which puts increasing pressure on central structures; (4) development of parallel power relationships, which sacrifice strict and clearly defined hierarchy for special independence for some and insecurity for others whom they control.<sup>3</sup>

As long as bureaucracy’s routine method of operation results in the solution or at least the alleviation of some problems, there is a disincentive for drastic reform. But the drag of handicaps, such as Crozier’s fourfold listing, can eventually incline a bureaucracy away from this necessary competence, so that decisions are made and energies spent that have virtually no bearing on the problems to be met. Once bureaucracy departs from a rational method of means-ends calculations, the inertia of routine, combined with the protection of expertise, makes changes of direction from the outside extremely difficult to impose. The inherent tactical advantage of inertia itself is that doing nothing will allow continuation on course.<sup>4</sup>

#### Medical Care – Public Needs and Non-Public Interests

A wide variety of examples of bureaucratic behavior could be cited. One of the most germane to analysis of political change in Britain, despite the passage of time, is Professor Harry Eckstein’s study of the administration of the National Health Service in that country. He discovered a number of practical examples of the sort of problems here under discussion. Centralization of decision making put massive pressures on central administrators (Crozier’s factor 3), which in turn led to a constant search for simple “costing procedures” in medical spending (factor 1), even though guidelines of this type – when applied automatically – fail to consider all the elements that should be taken into account when trying to determine the appropriate budget for a hospital.

In the face of this rigidity, the strength of the central bureaucratic regime stifles protest both between different strata (factor 2), and from below within the same strata (factor 4). Eckstein, noting the force of habit within structures, observed that temporary decisions were almost impossible to change once they were made, and that there was a noticeable tendency to postpone hard decisions almost indefinitely. In the phrase of a witness before the Committee on Estimates: “The word temporary is a term of art in the Civil Service.”<sup>5</sup>

This very large subject of the internal contradictions of bureaucratic organizations is the most obvious and striking connected with administrative planning and implementation. The irony of the paradox inherent in the search for administrative rationality is clear and apparent, but that is not the only type of tension that occurs. A

different, less obvious and ironic difficulty results from the conflict between central and local perspectives in planning efforts.

This second approach focuses on the complexity that a decision that may seem eminently rational from a national planning viewpoint, a decision untainted by administrative paradox in central bureaucracy, may nevertheless seem highly irrational and undesirable when examined in light of local criteria of what is more important and what less. The issue is significant for Britain, where substantial reliance on national economic planning has developed even though there remains considerable cultural, social and economic diversity between the different regions of the nation.

In British medical-care administration – among other policy areas – centralization has led to an ignoring of the special needs of particular hospital units. The shortcoming here is clear mainly because a welfare state function is at state. The central decision makers may be willing to tolerate such a situation because of administrative paradox (e.g., they like having the political power of decision making, even if the arrangement is not sensitive to local needs; or if, in their eyes, the cost of expanding central sensitivity to local diversity clearly outweighs the benefits of such a change). Even so, however, they are not meeting their own formal criteria of providing inclusive and efficient welfare service. Scarcity of resources or political self-interest is clear compromise of the general welfare goal of altruism that is accepted in theory by both the center and the localities.

The planned economy provides more instructive cases of center/local conflict, for here the goal is maximum economic production rather than providing welfare. The aim is one of expansion rather than distribution. Human comfort is secondary rather than primary to a planner whose eye is focused on increasing output. Such an atmosphere is more conducive to center/local clash, thanks to the hard choices required. Hard choices are necessary in the distribution of resources, too, but inability to fill needs here is a failure from both viewpoints, central and local. In the planned economy, localities may be injured by projects that make national sense to planners at the center.

An excellent, if extreme, example of that sort of problem is posed by the Beeching Report of 1963 concerning the state of the British railway system. The study advocated shutting down almost all rail lines that were not paying their way, in order to put British railways on a profitable basis. The central/local clash involved was in clear geographic, rather than less clear administrative, terms. Such lines included a major portion of the railways in both Scotland and Wales. The same decision that made eminent sense from a national desire to increase overall economic efficiency was disastrous for these areas. After the report was published, “doing a Beeching” became a slang label for any particularly wrenching or ruthless move. Nevertheless, by the late 1960s, the report’s recommendations had largely been implemented.<sup>6</sup>

The event is an instructive example of a broader phenomenon. Both Scotland and Wales have lived with the severe economic problems of declining areas; both regions have received substantial government. However, this assistance has not been sufficient to remove disparities, and the administration of programs has at times given rise to new tensions. The regions also suffer from depopulation and other social problems that are either unique to these peripheries or especially prominent within them.<sup>7</sup>

A third problem, different in turn from those of administrative paradox and central/local conflict, concerns the choice between universality and selectivity in social welfare.

The center/local disagreement is a function of economic planning; its tension results from the issue of how to determine assistance for economically peripheral areas. To the center, national economic efficiency is the basic goal. To the periphery, such a goal may be desirable but surely not if it is asked to pay a heavy price to purchase national gains. The universality/selectivity conflict is a function of welfare-state activity; its tension results from the issue of how best to aid economically peripheral groups. The pristine model of centrally planned economy sacrifices such groups to the prime goal of efficient allocation of resources, according to design. The welfare state, at least theoretically, is supposed to include them in its aid.

The debate in center/local or center/periphery discussion turns on whether social altruism or a local economic perspective should be allowed to overcome the national economic perspective of the planners. The debate in universality/selectivity discussion turns on how best to provide benefits that have already been agreed upon as the policy goal.

Universal benefits refers to a system in which social services are provided uniformly to the entire population, or at least to a sector of the population that is not singled out on the basis of need. Selectivity, again as the title implies, seeks to aim available aid to those most in need. It has the administrative advantage of focusing on the very poorest, those who need help most. At the same time, there is the concomitant political disadvantage of virtually guaranteed unpopularity with the population at large.

Because selective programs usually lack support, they run two risks aside from the obvious one of outright abolition. First, they tend to degenerate in quality. As one poverty analyst stated categorically, "Generally, services for the poor become poor services."<sup>8</sup> Second, they tend to be turned into programs that aid not the poor, but the comparatively prosperous majority. In other words, they are transformed from selective to nonselective vehicles of aid.<sup>9</sup>

Universal programs, in contrast, have the political advantage of wide popular acceptance, but combine that with the administrative disadvantage of either excluding the poor from the start or being altered to do so later on. Whether the structure chosen is broad universality or has the special differentiation of selectivity, those most in need are most likely to be neglected.

Generally, the British have sacrificed the potential administrative strengths of selectivity for the universal approach to social services. At least to some extent, they have experienced the tendency of this type of system to result in the exclusion from public benefits of some of the neediest sectors of society. An excellent example of this is the manner in which the British housing subsidy program has worked. The Milner Holland Committee, which reported in 1965, testified that council housing – public housing owned by local units of government – in fact aided primarily the fairly well-off sectors of society. Council tenants, as well as owner-occupiers, were given large subsidies, even when they were not poor by any reasonable definition of that term. Tenants of privately owned housing, however, were excluded from the subsidy program; yet the Milner Holland group found, on balance, that these tenants contained a higher proportion of the very poor than either of the other categories.<sup>10</sup>

Inferentially, this result is a reflection of the obvious point that those with higher incomes often have greater political influence than those who are less affluent, and so are able further to increase their prosperity. At the same time, the British housing subsidy

program is a good example of the ways in which the political ideologies that inform collectivist politics can work against the very goals to which they formally aspire.

The Milner Holland Committee recommended that steps be taken to make housing subsidies more rational. The Labour government of Harold Wilson, however, was extremely reluctant to implement the necessary changes because of important elements in party doctrine. According to Socialist ethos, landlords are automatically “bad” and council housing “good”. Hence, to supply, or even appear to supply, subsidies that somehow aided private landlords would create considerable turmoil within the Labour Party. The managers of the Labour government were entirely aware of how the housing situation could be improved, but equally conscious of the political difficulties of making significant reforms in the face of the attitudes of the party rank and file and also the bulk of the electorate.<sup>11</sup>

#### The Politics of Bureaucracy

Political factors are clearly in evidence in a case such as this, working obviously and strongly to deflect administrative rationality from the course it probably would have taken were such politics not part of the calculus. But, in fact, political influence invades administrative decision making at all levels and in all forms of decision. It is certainly not to be slighted when examining any or all of the three types of bureaucratic tension discussed above: administrative paradox, central/local conflict, universality/selectivity conflict.

Politics in bureaucracy can be internal, a phenomenon considered in the administrative paradox. Crozier examines this specifically and in conceptual detail when he describes the development of internal isolation and parallel power relationships, and the essentially political conditions of dependence and control that resulted from them. More broadly, administrative organizations develop their own political goals and purposes, relying on their technical expertise to gain leverage.

Political influence can be external too, through the impact of political parties and interest groups. The need of parties for electoral support, and the need of government for pressure group allies in order to gain support and expertise, means that administration can be doubly affected by outside influences.

First, administrative goals are defined in the light of political-electoral considerations. Second, even when this is not the case, the power and degree of access of British interest groups in collectivist politics puts them in a good position to deflect patterns of administration toward their desired end. When a particular bureaucracy lacks sufficient special expertise or political skill for independence and effective influence, these external interests are provided an opportunity to gain access and influence.

Beer’s classic analysis develops a distinction between party and interest group influence as they relate to the welfare state and the planned economy. To gain votes at elections, parties must successfully persuade the electorate. They are required to “bid” with “consumer groups” for support. In modern Britain, where two parties have been fairly evenly matched, characteristically battling fiercely for a relatively small undecided vote, the bidding process has been rather intense. The bidding vehicle has been the welfare state. The planned economy requires the cooperation and expert knowledge of “producer groups”, and so the government of the day will “bargain” with them for loyalty and assistance, keeping all the while a wary eye on the rival shadow of the principal opposite party.

Again, because of the great amount of central planning in modern Britain, and the need for the planned economy to work well enough to provide political success, the incentives for bargaining to succeed have been great from the point of view of the political elites in power.<sup>12</sup>

It should not be assumed that two completely different physical populations and policy areas are implied by the labels “consumer groups” and “producer groups”. Rather, many of the same groups and policies are being divided according to different roles. Such operations as the National Health Service do seem to be almost exclusively welfare-state functions, and their services are of such a basic nature in modern Britain that they are unlikely to be seriously compromised for reasons of economic planning.

On the other hand, Beer notes that such policy fields as taxation can be viewed as falling into either social welfare or economic planning categories, depending upon which effects of tax policy are selected for examination. The differences between consumer and producer groups, a basic typological distinction for our purposes, is found not in their compositions but in the ways they make their influence felt. The lever of producer groups is functional representation through the executive; the lever by which consumer groups are won is party government through Parliament. The former includes access of groups directly into administrative decision making; the latter the discipline imposed on M.P.s by party leadership, and rank-and-file political representatives, sensitive to public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

There is a solidity, rigidity to this series of arrangements that guarantees that there will be powerful opponents to virtually any alteration in major public policies. Election considerations and the self-serving influences of pressure groups constantly impose themselves over what seems to make good economic or administrative sense. For instance, an energetic government incomes policy is – at least in theory – one way to control the sort of rapid inflation that plagued Britain through much of the postwar period. The hostility of trade unions to such steps, however, constantly prevented successive governments from pursuing wage-control efforts for more than brief periods. Harsh conflict with unions brought down the government of Edward Heath in 1974. By contrast, the success of the government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s in restraining union demands and undercutting strike action was an early indication that the dynamics of collectivist politics were changing in modern Britain.

Similarly, private investment, a requirement for durable economic growth, can be encouraged through braking consumption, but through most of the period following the Second World War pressures to win elections prevented British governments from limiting consumption in a drastic manner.<sup>14</sup> It was this state of affairs that led Beer to suggest as early as 1955 that British politics might be reaching such a comprehensive state of organization that movement in any direction in public policy innovation might soon require virtual unanimity among the interest groups involved. He repeated this point in a 1969 essay in which he argued that the cost of modern British party government and functional representation was “immobilism”, “pluralistic stagnation”, terms that describe themselves.<sup>15</sup>

However, in this dimension the past quarter century has brought notable changes, especially in regard to the functioning of the economy. Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has taken particular pride in print in the success of her government in removing government regulations and controls on business, and selling public assets to the private

sector. By contrast, she feels less success was achieved in welfare state matters, which implies, but very strongly, that direct benefits which at least in terms of plan and intention reach the population at large are less easily changed than relationships with economic producer groups. As prosperity grows, the ultimate pragmatism of the business person becomes steadily more influential, undercutting traditional Toryism as well as the intense grip of Socialist ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Conservative Party literature understandably often emphasizes the robust economic growth of recent years in Britain, which has continued steadily into the post-Thatcher era. The expansion has been directly associated with deregulation and broadening popularity of market economics. This has also been part of a global trend among industrialized nations, and is an important dimension of the phenomenon of “globalization”, in turn a focus of a flood of books and a constellation of activist groups.

The Conservative Party *Campaign Guide 1997* inadvertently gives emphasis to this international dimension, which can hardly be credited exclusively to this particular national political formation: “The aim of the Government’s supply-side policies is to create a more flexible and competitive economy by making markets work better. These policies have been widely praised. According to the OECD, the structural reforms the Government has pursued over the last fifteen years have made the UK ‘a more flexible and less inflation prone economy’ (OECD *Economic Survey* of the UK Economy, May 1996).” The Guide goes on to cite an International Monetary Fund document on the value of deregulation, privatization and other structural reforms which facilitate economic competition. Citing such information very early in the volume underscores the priority importance of the subject.<sup>17</sup>

There can be no doubt that most, if not all, of the large established interest groups of the collectivist era preferred the status quo to the uncertainties of political decentralization. To decentralize, after all, means to disperse the multiply the doors that must be opened to achieve influence, to require established interests to build new avenues of access. In addition, national interest groups are more likely to find themselves in tune with the views of central – meaning national – administrators than with local officials.

Both public and private decision makers on the national level are likely to have considerable congruence of perspective on economic policy decisions. Both populations look out on a relatively uniform landscape in terms of their primary political and policy concerns, with a tendency to overlook or minimize the importance of particular local concerns. Local councillors, for example, are likely to object strongly to industrial air and water pollution, damaged landscapes and ugly buildings. National bureaucrats are likely to value strongly the broad economic benefits derived from the very industries and utilities that produce undesirable local byproducts. Local officials, and their constituents, have to live amid environmental waste; national planners are charged with raising productivity in ways that do not exclude, but may minimize, pollution concerns.

This argument is out of tune with the conventional wisdom of traditional American party-political liberalism, at least until recent decades, that central government could be counted upon to be more progressive, less tied to special interests and parochial habits, than local government. This argument nevertheless is supported by some persuasive evidence. Though testifying separately in 1967 before the Royal Commission on Local Government, the varied groups Aims of Industry, the Manchester Chamber of

Commerce, and the National Chamber of Trade all concurred that the prime shortcoming of local government was the “almost total absence” of the collective voice of industry and commerce on local councils. As a parallel point, in 1959 the Federation of British Industries opposed the attempt of the town of Halifax to take water management out of the hands of a ministerially appointed board and place it under the control of a board appointed by the Halifax Council. The federation maintained that such a board could not be “fully representative” of the local interests they serve.<sup>18</sup>

Trade unions have echoed management groups in opposing devolution of regulatory authority to local government. They have expressed fears that local businessmen will have too much influence on local councils. Among other instances, this issue arose during discussions in 1963 over the advisability of the Offices, Shops, and Railways Premises Act, a proposal to maintain uniform minimum working conditions. Management and labor joined in urging that this regulation should take place through national bodies, rather than entrusting supervision to local authorities. More generally, both sides in industry seemed to reach firm de facto agreement that nationally uniform standards of regulation were best for them, and that the procedure is only practicable through use of national institutions.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, thanks to established structures of functional representation, producer groups are also in a good position to influence the form such standards assume.

These attitudes within institutions of national government and in the groups that influence them have important negative consequences for particular sectors of society and sections of the nation. Reviewing qualities of central/local and universality/selectivity choice will aid in making this point. Producer groups have a strong incentive to urge central perspectives in economic planning.

First, producer groups tend to be national in structure; thus, planning in large bureaucracies in London is made to order for their influence and persuasion. Parallel structures make access easier. Second, since, as has been noted, producer groups tend to have national orientation as well, even without pressure from them a national focus in public planning activity is more likely to be in accord with their wishes. In a similar manner, broad-based consumer groups have an interest in securing universal welfare programs. The bulk of the electorate is not poor. If welfare programs were strictly selective in simple terms, the vast majority of the population – and of the electorate – would be excluded. Universality, therefore, is the politically wise course.

Thus, the two circles are complete. Parties bid for votes through a universalist approach to the welfare state, backed by strong discipline to ensure the passage of programs. Universality is more popular with the great majority of voters. Governments bargain with producer groups for support while relying basically on a central outlook in planning. A central perspective is the one favored by producer groups, as well as being most likely to please most of the electorate. The broad influences of politics neatly reinforce universality over selectivity and centrality over locality.

By definition, this general approach to public policy ensures that some sections and sectors of the nation are relegated to secondary status. Certain regions, notably Scotland and Wales, are hurt by programs such as Beeching, which are designed to assist the economy as a whole. Universal welfare programs tend to overlook at least some of the very poor – and, unlike selective approaches, can do so quietly from the start – as has been the experience of at least some sectors of the British housing subsidy program.

Of course, these pictures have been overdrawn for emphasis. There have been significant selective social welfare and regional development programs, especially in more recent years. The point is that generally dominant trends in the planned economy and the welfare state have created instruments for the exclusion and frustration of some, along with subsidy and security for most.

#### The Liberal Role

Those left out of most of the benefits of planning because of their location or out of the subsidy of the welfare state in spite of their poverty obviously have a marked incentive for hostility to the status quo, and for advocacy of or sympathy with radical reform. During the Collectivist Age, one potential political home and base for these groups, but not by any means the only refuge, was the Liberal Party, which has been followed by the successor Liberal-Social Democratic Alliance and now the Liberal Democrats.

This formation, which has been approximately continuously Liberal over time, has been markedly separated from the outlooks, ethos and ideologies of collectivism, and therefore especially sensitive to the problems of both the sections and the sectors excluded from the administrative and political calculus of modern Britain at the national level. Liberalism, after all, a particularly individualistic philosophy, is consequently based on the desirability of autonomy and diversity. It is natural, therefore, for the good Liberal to put the needs of particular local units at the center of his or her sociopolitical perspective, and to put assistance for the very needy before abstract conceptions of universal equality, class solidarity or – especially popular today – the inherent virtue as well as efficiency of the relatively open competitive economic marketplace.

John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century defended a complex – some might argue absurdly complex – system of proportional representation in order that every individual might be counted as an independent factor in the electoral calculator.<sup>20</sup> Very different are the rigid class conceptions explicit in Labour doctrine, or the natural inequality implicit in the values of many good Tories. These points about party values arguably remain true in important ways, though significantly reduced in influence by the deconstruction of nationalization carried out by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the philosophical rejection, or at least minimization, of Socialist doctrine carried out by Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Yet the neglected peripheries of collectivist Britain, social and geographic, have never sponsored a solid, reliable, markedly large-scale increase in national electoral support of the Liberal Democrats or predecessor parties, no matter how much they may have contributed to a more extensive revival of Liberal policy and activist styles. Several factors appear to be important here. The Liberals and Liberal Democrats have stressed local social work and voluntarism, but this has not redounded directly to the benefit of party. The poor generally are comparatively inactive politically, and their efforts are often seriously hindered by lack of political sophistication. Moreover, while the absolute human misfortune of poverty in modern Britain may be substantial, the poor have remained not only a minority of the population, but dispersed as well. Deprived sections even of highly concentrated urban and metropolitan areas are often swallowed up, in electoral terms, by the more prosperous areas that surround them.

Moreover, Liberal Democrats have been unable to identify with peripheral regions of the nation with the clarity or decisive effectiveness sufficient to establish truly

substantial political influence. The Tory and Labour parties have remained consistently stronger than the Liberals in both Scotland and Wales, and the nationalist parties in each region have further complicated the electoral calculus. The Liberal electoral revivals of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Social Democratic and Liberal Democratic fortunes of more recent years, have tended rather to be spread across the entire nation.<sup>21</sup>

An important element, broader in scope and implications than either center/local or universality/selectivity choices, is related to the problem of administrative paradox or the vicious circle of bureaucracy. This refers to the ironic situation in which efforts at administrative rationality undermine themselves and in consequence stimulate public discontent and lack of confidence. A less specific related incentive for voter rebellion is that the sense of distance and insensitivity created by large bureaucratic organizations can foster public unhappiness and hostility to the way things work, even when administrative routine remains “rational” – i.e., not greatly affected by the sort of political independence that worried Weber or the more specific internal problems defined by Crozier.

#### Liberal Politics – Democratic Ethos, Popular Organizations

Ultimately, each of the three problems of modern public policy outlined earlier is useful to an understanding of the survival and revival of the Liberal Party and the relatively strong political support enjoyed by the contemporary Liberal Democratic Party. Each helps explain electoral advances and intellectual stimulus in policies, although a complete discussion of party history since the Second World War requires consideration of other factors as well. All three topics – administrative paradox, central/local tension, and universal/selective tension, doubtless have played roles in drawing activists who reject the styles and priorities of the two main political parties. All three were important to the generation and regeneration of dissident policies, especially during the years when the Liberal Party was led by Jo Grimond. That was a time of considerable public attention and excitement, but also strong attention to policy definition and analysis.

The administrative paradox of collectivism encourages general interest in decentralization; the more explicit tensions associated with collectivism focus attention on policy alternatives involving devolution of political power and selectivity in public services. In fact, during the Grimond years a number of writers and scholars were drawn to the party as a vehicle for “breaking out” of what were seen to be increasingly rigid, unimaginative trends in public policy.

The general public, and even some Liberal Democrats, may see the party as secondary in the constant interplay for national political power, but few if any serious observers could credibly dismiss the party entirely. The Liberal Democrats do not fit with the spirit, the organization, and the attitudes of modern collectivism. But this very quality connects the Liberal Democrats to established political structures and attitudes, including lingering support for collectivist approaches. In one aspect at least the Liberals and now Liberal Democrats have been peripheral parties, representing the interests of peripheral and neglected segments of the population. They have also served to define the problems that have accompanied collectivist politics, as well as reflecting some of the popular hostility those problems have generated.

This implies the broadest reason for the continuing survival, and recent revivals, of Liberal politics. In the period after the Second World War, the consistent growth of prosperity in most Western nations, the apparent lack of energy in many formerly strongly ideological political parties, and the refinement of management and

administration as a specialized and at times arcane approach to the process of decision making, encouraged a belief that severe domestic political conflicts and tensions were becoming a thing of the past. This was the position of those social scientists who predicted an “end” to “ideology”.<sup>22</sup>

However, the fortunes of the Liberal Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal/Social Democratic Alliance and now the Liberal Democratic Party, and the related growth in importance of sectional issues, provide evidence for the argument that politics remains considerably more than dispassionate administration. Politics interferes constantly with bureaucratic procedures and charts of organization. The bureaucratic process itself tends to be self-defeating. Issue based groups proliferate, along with service organizations of all types removed from both government and the commercial sector. Beyond the inherent contradictions of bureaucracy and the public policy processes, differences in values among various groups and sectors of the population implies that the removal of some points of political conflict will only open the door to others.

#### Liberal Politics in Britain

The unsteady but generally upward electoral support received by the Liberals, Social Democrats and Liberal Democrats suggests that these parties have drawn to themselves currents of political change and frustration that the two major parties have been unable to absorb. Various discontents have fueled the smaller parties. However, the problems of administrative paradox, center/local choice and universal/selective choice do provide more specific foci for sustained analysis, with implications for the broader party system in Britain.

In recent decades, there has been congruence between various scholars and other analysts in seeing a decline in class politics, voting and cleavages in terms of political participation. The general growth in electoral volatility, along with support for third parties, implies this phenomenon. The retreat of the Conservative and Labour parties from established collectivist principles is perhaps the most dramatic doctrinal reflection of the phenomenon. In a relatively subtle sense, this shift is reflected in the embrace of the fully open competitive economic market, including ruthless dimensions, by the Conservatives during the Thatcher years.

With no really effective subtlety at all, the Labour Party early in Tony Blair’s tenure as leader effectively jettisoned nationalization of industry as a principal policy as well as philosophical preoccupation. In “New Labour”, ideology was radically adjusted to line up with the pragmatism and media-savvy flair of Blair. The Conservative Party can always be expected to smite the Labour foe quite vigorously. However, the addition of “New” to the Labour mantle predictably led to especially sarcastic disdain. The Tories’ *Campaign Guide 1997* sneered that, “The most blatant piece of repackaging came in the attempt to change the party’s name to New Labour, as if adding the word ‘new’ made up for almost 100 years of failing the nation.”<sup>23</sup>

Scholars Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, among many others, have echoed analysts and observers before and since in perceiving, and emphasizing, a lack of consistent class base to the Liberal/Social Democratic electorate in their thorough study of the Social Democratic Party. This absence of an established reliable electoral foundation has generally been regarded as a weakness, and generally they reflect that perspective. Such a judgment in turn indicates the acceptance, at least in implicit terms, of a political environment in which collectivism remains the operative foundation for

much of party political competition, and policy development and implementation. Highly structured politics does imply a reliable electorate.<sup>24</sup>

Yet collectivist structures, and British society, clearly are evolving in ways that should provide tangible political opportunities for Liberal activists, including politicians, as well as Liberal principles. The Liberal Democrats, still very much a minority force in British politics, nevertheless by temperament as well as philosophy are positioned to adjust in a flexible and fluid manner to specific openings in quite varied parliamentary constituencies around the country. There are also expanding opportunities for activism beyond elections at the parliamentary level of government. Crewe and King themselves stress the degree to which local government continues to be a growth realm for Liberal Democrats, reflecting a trend that has characterized the long-term Liberal revival since the beginning under Grimond.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond local and national levels of government, the established party structures and interest groups and the political competition among them, there is the much more flexible, informal and unstructured context of associations which pursue interests beyond those of large established producer groups. Britain has a strongly established tradition of activist reform and also social service organizations. In the contemporary period, there has been considerable growth and expansion of these associations. In such fields as environmental regulation, corporate governance, aid to the poor and many others, local and national groups link to increasingly strong international networks.

The handbook and directory of the National Council of Social Services, *Voluntary Social Services*, lists figures that indicate that the rate at which national voluntary service associations have been formed has accelerated markedly since the nineteenth century. Before 1860, there were records for only twelve such organizations. Between 1860 and 1899, thirty-one were formed, a marked increase over the previous years but not equal to the rate which followed. Forty-six groups were established between 1900 and 1939, twenty-three each during the periods 1900-19 and 1920-39. The rate accelerated after 1939, with thirty-one created between 1940 and 1959. By the early 1980s, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, a successor formation, had five hundred twenty-eight members, and one hundred fifty more had been added by the middle of the decade. Beer anticipated this trend at the end of the 1960s.<sup>26</sup>

Parties and interest groups retain very powerful, enduring legacies from Collectivist Age politics, and the attendant class system. Today we are in a rapidly evolving activist age, where interests are diversifying, and perceived incentives and opportunities for direct citizen pressure are multiplying dramatically. The individualism and philosophical rejection of economic and social class of the Liberal tradition, and the loose organization and hostility to formal structure and discipline of the Liberal Democrats, are very much in tune with this broad trend. The fortunes of the party therefore should continue to be relatively promising over time, though uneven and unpredictable at any particular time.

## Notes

1. Alfred Grosser, "The Evolution of European Parliaments," in Stephen Graubard (ed.), *A New Europe?*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 230; Samuel H. Beer, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*, New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, 1965, 1969, especially Chapter 3.
2. Quoted in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 233.
3. Michael Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 187 ff.
4. See, e.g., Peter Woll, *American Bureaucracy*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1963, pp. 161 ff.
5. Harry Eckstein, "Planning: The National Health Service," in Richard Rose (ed.), *Policy-Making in Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1969, pp. 221-237. Theodore Marmor and David Thomas published a strongly critical evaluation of Eckstein's work in this field. However, their complaint was not that his general description of the structure of the health service was inaccurate, but that he lacked from their point of view sufficient conceptual rigor and an important cross-national perspective in his analysis of bargaining between doctors and health administrators. See "Doctors, Politics and Pay Disputes: 'Pressure Group Politics' Revisited." *British Journal of Political Science*, October 1972, pp. 421-442.
6. Anthony Sampson, *The Anatomy of Britain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Harper, 1965, pp. 580 ff.; Richard Caves and Associates, *Britain's Economic Prospects*, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1968, p. 408.
7. For example, Gavin McCrone, *Scotland's Future – The Economics of Nationalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969, *passim*.
8. Charles I. Schottland, "Public Assistance," in Samuel H. Beer and Richard E. Barringer (eds.), *The State and the Poor*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, 1970, p. 103.
9. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 194.
10. Caves, *op. cit.*, p. 15; Brian Lapping, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 170-171.
11. Lapping, p. 171.
12. Beer, *op. cit.*, Chapter 12.
13. *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 421-426.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 408-409; Samuel Beer, "The Future of British Politics: An American View," *Political Quarterly*, January/March 1955, pp. 33-42.
16. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, New York: Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 671 ff. on her satisfaction with deregulation and privatization of industry achieved by her government, compared with relative inability to limit the welfare state.
17. Alistair B. Cooke, *The Campaign Guide 1997*, Westminster, London: Conservative Central Office, p. 9. On the international dimensions, see e.g. Arthur I. Cyr "Guides to Globalization," *Orbis*, Spring 2001, 295-305.

18. Howard Scarrow, "Policy Pressures and Initiatives by British Local Government: The Case of Regulation in the 'Public Interest,'" unpublished paper, p. 19.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
20. The reference is to the Hare System of proportional representation advocated by Mill. For an interesting discussion of representation in various dimensions, see Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy*, Waltham, Toronto, London: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1937, 1950, Chapter XV.
21. This absence of strong sectional identification puts the British Liberals and Social Democrats in contrast with other third parties in Commonwealth nations. See for example Leon Epstein, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, New York: Praeger, 1967, p. 70.
22. See for example James Christoph, "Consensus and Cleavage in British Political Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, September 1965, pp. 629-642.
23. *The Campaign Guide 1997*, op. cit., p. 749.
24. Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP – The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*, Oxford, New York, et. al.: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 295.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 474, 520-521.
26. Kathleen Slack, "Voluntary Effort," in James Farndale (ed.), *Trends in Social Welfare*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965, pp. 36-37. On the National Council of Volunteer Organizations, see the organization's web site <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk>. Beer anticipates these new trends. See, e.g., the "Epilogue" to the Vintage edition of *Collectivist Age*, op. cit., pp. 391-434. A definite rejection of nationalization and other distinctive ideological elements of Socialism have not been accompanied by any comparable dismantling of the established welfare state.