

## **Party Reform: Where are Australia's Political Parties Headed in the Future? \***

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On 24 September 2016, Jeremy Corbyn was re-elected leader of the UK Labour Party in a vote that attracted the participation of more than half a million people. As a product of reforms to the Labour leadership selection process made back in 2014 to create a one member, one vote system and to expand participation to party affiliates and supporters, Corbyn's election has elicited two very different responses from political commentators and the general public. For some, the process has reinvigorated the Labour Party, substantially increasing membership and enabling hundreds of thousands of individuals to participate in a grassroots democratic movement. For others, these reforms have seen the party hijacked by its supporters—or instant members—who paid a few pounds to vote in the leadership contest to elect a leader with little broader electoral appeal.

The experience of the UK Labour Party highlights two very important questions that I want to explore in my lecture today. First, what motivates political parties to undertake organisational reforms? And, second, what are the consequences—both for parties themselves, and more broadly for representative democracy—when they do it?

Today I will take you through some of the research that I have conducted over the last four years on the democratisation of political parties in established democracies. I will draw on examples from Canada and the UK among other democracies, and share some of the experiences of a variety of different parties. The key motivation for this research is to better understand how political parties are responding to technological, social and institutional change, and the effectiveness of some of the organisational changes they have made in order to increase citizen engagement and ensure their relevance as participatory organisations in modern democracies.

### **Membership decline and party reform**

Perhaps the greatest concern that overshadows studies of party organisation today is the collapse of formal party membership. For parties such as the German Social Democrats, the halving of membership since the 1990s has created what has been described as 'beyond catastrophic circumstances', which mean that 'party reform is

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today more urgent than ever'.<sup>1</sup> The decline in party membership has been well documented in previous research<sup>2</sup>, but it impacts on how we might think about party organisational change in a number of important ways.

The first is the sheer pervasiveness of membership decline, which has been shown to affect parties both across democracies and across party families. Rather than being a specific 'problem' faced by only some parties, it is now part of a broader fight for institutional survival. This highlights not only the salience of the trend, but also the complexity of the problem as encompassing social changes that transcend states and parties with different ideological standpoints and organisational histories.

Another aspect of this pervasiveness is the extent to which membership decline impacts upon key party functions. Members have traditionally been seen as a committed group of activists that promulgate a party ideology, a source of outreach and policy innovation and as the providers of financial and campaigning resources.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as dwindling party memberships affect the performance of parties' participatory and representative functions, they also raise broader questions about the continued capacity of parties to enhance the quality of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most important role that party members have played is in creating a sense of democratic legitimacy for a political party. Although many are increasingly questioning the 'golden age' of the mass party and now regard it as a historical episode<sup>5</sup>, it still carries significant weight as a normative model of how political parties should be organised—evident in the common legal requirement that political parties must be established as membership organisations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Totz, *Ready for Change? The Party Reforms Planned by the Social Democratic Party of Germany*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015; Emilie van Haute and Anika Gauja (eds), *Party Members and Activists*, Routledge, London, 2015; Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke, 'Going, Going...Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 51, no. 1, January 2012, pp. 24–56; Paul Whiteley, 'Is the Party Over? The Decline of Party Activism and Membership across the Democratic World', *Party Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, January 2011, pp. 21–44; Susan Scarrow and Burcu Gezgor, 'Declining Membership, Changing Members? European Political Party Members in a New Era', *Party Politics*, vol. 16, no. 6, November 2010, pp. 832–43.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Scarrow, *Parties and their Members: Organizing for Victory in Britain and Germany*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 42–6; Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 63–4.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Ingrid van Biezen, 'The End of Party Democracy as We Know It? A Tribute to Peter Mair', *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, May 2014, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, 'The decline of membership-based politics', *Party Politics*, vol. 20, no. 2, January 2014, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Anika Gauja, 'The Construction of Party Membership', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 54, no. 2, May 2015, pp. 232–48.

So where does this leave political parties today? While there is a broad consensus on the pervasiveness and salience of membership decline, scholars disagree as to the consequences of this decline for the future of parties as linkage organisations, and whether membership is actually necessary for parties at all. For example, Katz and Mair's cartel party thesis highlights a changing organisational dynamic within parties where members become marginalised at the expense of an increasing dependence on the state.<sup>7</sup> In this view of what parties have become, sustaining a large membership is more about validating the 'legitimising myth of party democracy rather than remain[ing] true vehicles of linkage between party elites and society at large.'<sup>8</sup>

The alternate view is that members continue to remain important to the party organisation in the contemporary era. While it is certainly not surprising, the vast majority of political parties maintain a commitment to the continued importance and role of party members. But what does membership mean in the modern party organisation?

The UK Labour reform document, *Building a One Nation Labour Party*, provides an excellent illustration of how both the need for, and the strengths of, party reform can be conceptualised in terms of expanding the number of party members, as well as the notion of membership itself. Conducted by House of Lords peer and long-time trade unionist Ray Collins in 2013–14, the review was charged with reforming the party-trade union relationship and the leadership selection process under the auspices of building 'a truly 21st century party'.<sup>9</sup>

The report argued for the importance of party membership, noting that:

Members are the lifeblood of our party. It is essential that the rights that come with membership are recognised and understood. Party members play a crucial role in holding their MP to account, selecting their parliamentary candidate, selecting the Leader and Deputy Leader, picking delegates for annual conference, and much more besides.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, however, the organisational changes the Collins Review recommended involved opening up the Labour leadership selection process in such a way that members' 'crucial' role in leadership selection was substantially diluted.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 5–28; Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, 'The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement'. *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 7, no. 4, December 2009, pp. 753–66.

<sup>8</sup> van Biezen and Poguntke, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Ray Collins, *Building a One Nation Party Interim Report*, Labour Party, London, 2013, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

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Under these reforms, the three-way electoral college (comprised of members of the parliamentary party, party members and trade unions) that was originally established in 1981 was replaced by a one member, one vote system where the votes of Labour parliamentarians, party members, affiliated union supporters and registered party supporters were simply aggregated and weighted evenly.

In implementing these reforms the party moved from a closed leadership selection process in which unions had a collective voice to a semi-open one. The inclusiveness of the process was increased through the addition of registered supporters to the eligible voter pool. In advocating for the individualisation of union affiliation and the introduction of registered supporters, *Building a One Nation Labour Party* aimed to grow the party and realise Ed Miliband's 'bold vision to mobilise these individuals and build Labour into a mass party, growing our membership from 200,000 to 500,000, 600,000 or more.'<sup>11</sup>

While Ed Miliband's leadership ended after the party's 2015 general election loss, his vision for the party may have come to fruition. A group of over 552,000 Labour Party supporters signed up to participate to select his successor, Jeremy Corbyn. This contrasts significantly with party membership in 2013, which stood at just 190,000.

This particular instance of Labour Party reform departed from previous recruitment strategies in that it adopted a broader understanding of the concept of membership. By individualising the practice of union affiliation, the party sought to grow the membership by converting previous collective affiliates into individual supporters, effectively achieving an instant injection of members through redefining the notion of affiliation. By expanding the leadership franchise to registered supporters, the Labour Party expanded the notion of membership in a functional sense and created a much larger base of support to legitimise and promote the leadership selection. This vision of growing the party was both foreshadowed and encapsulated nicely by Ed Miliband's 2013 St Bride Foundation speech:

I want to build a better Labour Party...by shaping a Party appropriate for the twenty-first century not the twentieth century in which we were founded. Understanding we live in a world where individuals rightly demand a voice. Where parties need to reach out far beyond their membership.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ed Miliband, 'One Nation Politics', speech delivered at the St Bride Foundation, London, 9 July 2013, <http://archive.labour.org.uk/one-nation-politics-speech>.

## New preferences for political participation

The quote from Ed Miliband's St Bride Foundation speech is also interesting because it acknowledges the reality that citizens' preferences for political participation—the ways in which they do politics—are changing, and that political parties need to respond to this.

One of the most prominent themes associated with contemporary social and political change is that of 'individualisation'. As a form of behaviour, individualisation captures the notion that citizens seek to fulfil their own private desires rather than the common good. Driven by social changes such as increasing pressures on time, money and effort, a decline of working-class communities and trade union membership, it has been asserted that people are less willing to participate in collective forms of political activity. Rather than joining political parties, citizens have instead turned to other political organisations to channel their participation, or to direct forms of political action.

For some, these changing patterns represent the decline of political participation and engagement in society<sup>13</sup>, but for others<sup>14</sup> they signify a diversification in citizenship norms and political participation away from primarily duty-bound norms and actions to more engaged and autonomous forms of political participation, and to expanding political repertoires that are no longer focused on the formal institutions of the state. The practical manifestation of this change can be found in the rise of individualised or micro-political forms of participation, such as donating money, signing a petition, or purchasing particular types of goods 'without the need to interact with other people'.<sup>15</sup> Bennett and Segerberg argue that an individual's tendency to engage in these actions is influenced by their relationship to his or her lifestyle, which means that issues are both constructed and responded to in a personalised way.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to dutiful citizens, who see elections, governments and formal political organisations at the core of democratic participation, self-actualising citizens have weaker allegiances to

<sup>13</sup> John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: American's Beliefs about How Government Should Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Russell J. Dalton, 'Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation', *Political Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, March 2008, pp. 76–98; Henrik Bang, 'A new ruler makes a new citizen: Cultural governance and everyday making', in Henrik Bang (ed.), *Governance as Social and Political Communication*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, pp. 241–267; Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002; Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> W. Lance Bennett, and Alexandra Segerberg, 'Digital media and the personalization of collective action: Social technology and the organization of protests against the global economic crisis', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2011, p. 771.

government, form loose networks for social and political action, and focus on lifestyle and issue politics. By consequence, individual political actions are less likely to involve formal membership but rather a preference for joining selective actions and in citizens ‘displaying their participation in these actions publicly’<sup>17</sup>, increasingly through the use of social media.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1: Political activity: Australia (percentage of respondents)**

<b>Political Activity</b>	<b>All voters</b>	<b>ALP voters</b>	<b>Lib/Nat voters</b>	<b>Greens voters</b>	<b>Other voters</b>
Currently a member of a political party	2	1	2	1	1
Previously a member of a political party	4	4	5	1	2
Campaigning work for a political party or candidate—eg door knocking, phone canvassing	2	2	1	1	4
Handed out how-to-vote cards on election day	5	5	5	7	8
Been to a candidates meeting	1	2	1	4	–
Attended a rally	4	3	3	11	7
Signed an online petition or taken other online auction	20	24	14	37	21
None of them	60	56	68	37	55
Don’t know	2	3	1	1	1

Source: Essential Media Communications, 2014, N=1,056

The figures contained in Table 1 are a stark reminder of the insignificance of party and partisan forms of participation for Australian citizens. In an online Essential Media poll conducted in April 2014, respondents were asked about their political activity. A very small minority reported participating in parties in some way: whether that be as a member or by campaigning. Respondents were also asked whether they would consider becoming a member of a political party. Only 15 per cent of respondents indicated that they would, and this was the highest (19 per cent) amongst Greens voters. Men were twice as likely as women to consider joining (20 per cent as compared to 10 per cent), and by age, younger voters (under 30) were least likely to

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013; W. Lance Bennett, ‘The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 644, November 2012, pp. 20–39.

consider joining (81 per cent), compared to those aged 31–50 (69 per cent) and voters over 50 years of age (71 per cent).<sup>19</sup>

There are two ways in which participatory patterns such as these might impact upon the nature of party organisations, particularly as participatory arenas. The first is the potential withdrawal of political parties from society.<sup>20</sup> Faced with declining memberships, political parties might look elsewhere for resources, policy input and legitimacy. This is the response which has received a significant degree of academic attention and is characterised by the notion of a ‘hollowed out’ political party—one with a greatly reduced organisational structure in which party leaders communicate directly with the electorate by utilising mass communications technologies, resourced by the state.

The second option is that political parties change their internal structures and processes to better reflect these patterns of participation. If political parties adapt or evolve to new institutional environments, it stands to reason that they must also respond to a new type of politically active citizen. This may require a radical re-thinking of what we mean by the notion of a political party as a mediating institution and where its organisational boundaries lie. At the very least, a more nuanced account of what it means to be active within, or engaged with a political party, is necessary—one that moves beyond the notion of a formal member.

### **The creation of supporters’ networks**

I was the last of a generation of joiners. People don’t join organisations in the way they used to. It’s affecting service clubs, affecting even volunteer sporting organisations, churches ... People just don’t join in the way they used to now. There’s a whole lot of reasons for that, but—to some degree—the phenomenon that I’m talking about with political parties is a reflection of a different society where people don’t join.<sup>21</sup>

An excellent practical illustration of an organisational reform that is designed to respond to external pressures for change, in particular shifting participatory preferences, is the creation of formal supporters’ networks. As at October 2015, supporters’ or friends’ networks have been established by the social democratic parties in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as the UK Conservatives and the New Zealand National Party.

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<sup>19</sup> Essential Media Communications, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Mair, *Democracy Beyond Parties*, Discussion paper, Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, interview with author.

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These networks allow citizens to ‘join’ the party in a reduced capacity free of charge or with a donation of their choice. Becoming a friend or supporter of a political party can also be seen as an expressive action (for example, supporters may publicise this action on Facebook) and does not require any commitment on the part of the individual, and ‘offer[s] people a means of formalising their support for the party without going so far as becoming full members’.<sup>22</sup> This builds on the perception, as expressed by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, that it is the notion of membership that is problematic from the individual’s perspective, rather than support for the party and its policies per se.

Although it is defined in opposition to membership, what supportership actually means, and involves, is quite vague. Taking the New Zealand Labour Party as an example, a ‘registered supporter’ is defined as ‘a person who agrees to have their name listed as such.’<sup>23</sup>

As a result of the Collins Review<sup>24</sup> the vote of a registered supporter in a UK Labour leadership contest carried equal weight to that of an ordinary party member. The eventual scale of non-member involvement in the leadership contest also far outweighed what was previously anticipated and approved by the Labour Conference. Back in 2011, the *Refounding Labour* document, approved by Conference, stipulated that if the party could recruit more than 50,000 supporters, this would trigger these supporters being given three per cent of the electoral college in the vote for the party’s leader, which could rise to 10 per cent depending on the number of supporters’ recruited. In 2015, over 100,000 registered supporters participated in the ballot, comprising a 25 per cent share of the total electorate. In 2016, registered supporters comprised 24 per cent of those voting in the leadership contest.

In Australia, the Labor and National parties have also involved their supporters in candidate selections through the trial of open primaries for the selection of parliamentary candidates in state branches. Marketed as ‘community pre-selections’, voting in these primaries is a one-off event, with supporters pre-registering to vote but with no further obligation to the party.<sup>25</sup> However, these developments suggest that if supporters are also gradually given rights in leadership and candidate selections, then the distinction may not be as clear-cut as previously anticipated. As supporters are

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Hain, *The Future Party*, Catalyst, London, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> New Zealand Labour Party, *Labour Constitution and Rules*, 2014, par. 11, p. 5, <https://www.labourparty.org.nz/sites/default/files/2014%20Constitution.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Collins, *Building A One Nation Labour Party: The Collins Review Into Labour Party Reform*, Labour Party, London, February 2014, [http://action.labour.org.uk/page/-/Collins\\_Report\\_Party\\_Reform.pdf](http://action.labour.org.uk/page/-/Collins_Report_Party_Reform.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Anika Gauja, ‘The “Push” for Primaries: What Drives Party Organisational Reform in Australia and the United Kingdom?’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 47, no. 4, December 2012, pp. 641–58.



actively encouraged to contribute to policy debates, and as parties move to more consultative forms of policy development, the difference between members and supporters in this area of party activity seems even smaller still.

In Germany, the move to reach out to non-members in the Social Democratic Party proved to be controversial. Originally, party leader Sigmar Gabriel proposed a system of open primaries that would have seen non-member involvement in the party expanded to candidate and leadership selection. However, following harsh criticism within the party that primaries would undervalue the point of ‘proper party membership’ and a mixed reception in the press, this suggestion was retracted.<sup>26</sup> The compromise reached was to focus non-member or supporter participation in policy-related activities rather than include them in candidate, leadership or other types of representational decision-making within the party. In putting the reforms forward to the November 2011 party conference, the executive resolved that ‘structures should be put in place to allow non-members to vote on *specific issues*; supporter membership has been developed to this end which means that in future those interested can become supporters of a *certain working group or topical forum*’.<sup>27</sup>

The Canadian Liberals now present the most extreme example, outside of the United States, of the shift towards supporters’ networks. In May 2016 the party voted at its conference to dispense with the notion of membership entirely. Instead, anyone willing to register with the party (for free) is able to participate in policy development and candidate and leadership selection. The party, currently in government in Canada under the leadership of Justin Trudeau, advertises itself not as a party but as an open movement.

### **Community organising and movement politics**

Political parties are not just using the language of movements, but appropriating some of the organisational and campaigning techniques of movement politics. One of these techniques is community organising.

Originally copied from advocacy and third sector organisations, the basic principles of community organising—asking people what they care about rather than telling them

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Totz, *Ready for Change? The Party Reforms Planned by the Social Democratic Party of Germany*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 2011, p. 6; Amandine Crespy, ‘Germany’, in Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabion Escalova and Mathieu Viera (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*, Palgrave, London, 2013, p. 164.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Daniel Totz, *op. cit.*, p. 6, emphasis added; see also SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany, Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands], *Party on the Move: The SPD’s organizational policy program*, Resolution of the SPD Party Board, 26 September 2011, party document, pp. 7–8.

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what to think<sup>28</sup>—have become fused in the campaign practices of US political parties in the last decade through network building and the ‘creation, cultivation, and maintenance of ties with supporters that staffers could mobilize for collective social and symbolic action’.<sup>29</sup> Community organising, as American political parties have borrowed and applied it, reflects a process of technological adaptation and of learning and diffusion not simply between parties, but between parties and other political organisations that have creatively ‘redefined organizational membership and pioneered more novel fundraising practices’.<sup>30</sup>

In turn, what has been successfully used in American campaigning is seen as a source of inspiration to party organisations in Canada, Australia and the UK. For example, the Canadian Liberal Party pointed to the experience of the US Democratic Party in the foreword to its 2009 Change Commission Report and noted that:

Obama’s community development model has demonstrated the success in turning every supporter into a worker, a policy source and then a donor. They have perfected a model in which a supporter with four hours to contribute can be immediately plugged into four hours of meaningful work.<sup>31</sup>

Adapting the principles of community organising is a way in which political parties in Australia and the United Kingdom have attempted to strike a balance between member and non-member participation. In the United Kingdom, for example, the UK Labour Party had advocated these initiatives as examples of ‘best practice’ amongst its local groups. The Folkestone local branch led one of these local campaigns against parking charges in the town centre. Starting with an online petition, the campaign spread to an offline petition in the high street that collected 2,000 signatures, progressed to a series of community meetings and culminated in a local council referendum. Lauded by the party, the campaign was able to successfully reinvigorate the local branch, as members:

had a focus. Each week we would get ready to give a speech at a meeting, or prepare for a radio interview, or print more posters for the campaign ...

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<sup>28</sup> Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Kreiss, *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Liberal Party, Canada, *Advancing Change Together: A Time to Act*, The Report of the Change Commission of the Liberal Party of Canada, April 2009, p. 1.

We found a new energy in the local party, with new members taking the lead in campaigns and long standing members finding a new lease of life.<sup>32</sup>

Not only was participation within the party renewed at the local level, but the campaign also succeeded in bringing the Labour Party into the public view and integrating supporters as ‘for the first time, we became part of the community and built bridges with other groups that were working for the best interests of the town’.<sup>33</sup>

Translating this model of organising and participation to a national scale, in the context of election campaigning, has proved to be less successful for the UK Labour Party. One of the fundamental tensions inherent in the community organising model of partisan politics is between the decentralisation and autonomy of decision-making practiced by volunteers and local groups and the desire of the party organisation to maintain control of groups, processes and policy agendas. As Schultz and Sandy argue:

Organizing is not about doing *for* others. Instead, organizers are supposed to work *with* people to produce social change. A key tenet of organizing is that those affected by a particular social problem are usually best equipped to figure out what changes are most likely to make a real difference.<sup>34</sup>

However, as Nielsen notes, ‘campaign assemblages are trying to have it both ways: to mobilize the masses associated with membership-based associations while retaining the centralized control characteristic of management dominated advocacy groups’.<sup>35</sup> This tension was clearly evident in the community organising session led by US organiser Arnie Graf at the 2013 UK Labour Party conference. Once questions were solicited from the floor, a number of party members complained of the disjoint between community organising training, strategies at the local level and the priorities of the central party office. Despite instructions to forge community links and campaigns, a party member from the North London CLP spoke of interventions from central office aimed at ‘blocking efforts to organise’. Those canvassing were restricted to asking three questions of electors, and to work from centrally generated lists. Volunteers were directed not to talk to non-Labour voters and could not target constituents aged between 18 and 24. Similarly, a councillor from the local government area of Barking spoke of the mixed messages about the nature of activism within the party. The discussion was promptly shut down by a staffer from campaign

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<sup>32</sup> UK Labour Party, ‘Best practice: Folkstone Labour Party – Parking Changes Campaign’, Material distributed to participants in the 2013 Labour Party Conference ‘Train to Win’ Program.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Schutz and Sandy, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ground Wars: Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012, p. 187.

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central office who deferred questions to a private meeting at the end of the session. These events (which happened behind closed doors at the party conference) illustrate not only the ongoing coordination issues when staffers and volunteers ‘have divergent ideas of how campaigns should be run and varying commitments and goals’<sup>36</sup> but also the inherent contradictions between the principles of community organising and partisan politics.

### **Moving organisation online**

The transfer of modes of organising from political advocacy organisations to political parties (and vice versa) is, however, not limited to offline activities. Perhaps more important to the way in which political parties structure themselves and engage with their members and supporters than the diffusion of community organising and campaigning practices has been the gradual uptake of social networking sites and online platforms to provide the basis for a different kind of online organisational infrastructure. For example, all three of the major parties in the UK have adopted NationBuilder as an online community organising software platform that enables parties to build campaign sites that incorporate communications, fundraising and volunteer management/profiling functions. It was also used by the ALP in its 2016 federal election campaign. A US company, NationBuilder describes itself as ‘a unique non-partisan community organizing system’ that enables clients to establish campaign sites at a relatively low cost and with a relatively low level of expertise.<sup>37</sup> NationBuilder effectively taps into individuals’ propensities to respond to issue-based politics, rather than ideological cues. Linking a party’s page to a variety of different ‘micro sites’ that showcase different causes and campaigns, enables users to engage with the party on their own terms, whether that be through donating, signing an online petition, posting comments or campaigning offline.

In addition to online platforms such as NationBuilder, social media is playing an increasingly important role in how political parties engage with citizens, and vice versa. The relatively personalised nature of these communications technologies is highlighted by comparing the ratio of parties’ to leaders’ social media followers. I looked at the major parties in Australia, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, France and Germany and found that in two-thirds of the cases the party leaders attracted more followers on Twitter than their respective party organisations. This was particularly apparent amongst conservative party leaders such as David Cameron, Stephen Harper and Malcolm Turnbull, whose Twitter followings outnumbered those of their parties, on average, more than seven times over. Just over half the leaders had a larger base of

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Kreiss, *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> See <http://nationbuilder.com>.

friends on Facebook than their respective parties, with Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, David Cameron and Justin Trudeau attracting followings that far exceeded their parties' memberships.

It is interesting to note how rapidly parties' engagement with social media has grown. Susan Scarrow reported that in 2011 only one party, the British Conservatives, had more than 100,000 Facebook likes. She also noted that in each country as a group, the number of traditional members still exceeded Facebook followers.<sup>38</sup> In 2016, of the 15 parties I covered in my research, 11 had more than 100,000 Facebook likes and the Conservatives were up to 565,000. However, the evidence presented here also supports Scarrow's argument that rates of social media engagement relative to traditional party membership are not uniform across all democracies. While it is safe to say that social media audiences are larger than party membership bases in Australia and the United Kingdom, and are roughly on par in Canada and New Zealand, in Germany and France—with the exception of the leaders' followers on Twitter—traditional party membership still exceeds social media followings.

In so far as platforms such as Facebook and Twitter cultivate greater links between party supporters and individual politicians within the party, they suggest that the process of organisational reform may also be dispersing—with individuals, and particularly party leaders, possessing greater autonomy and power (through social media platforms that require relatively little skill or whose operation can be outsourced to the provider) to craft their own online organisational links and structures. As a type of organisational reform, the mobilisation of supporters and the links cultivated through social media are a relatively 'low-cost' activity in that they can be implemented quickly by party staffers, leaders and parliamentarians, without the necessity of membership consultation or approval. Yet in creating a more individualised and direct channel of communication between parties, politicians and the public, the organisational consequences are potentially far greater than the ease of reform would suggest.

### **What is the impact of these changes?**

The picture painted of the modern political participant—and hence a potential partisan—is of someone who is time poor, reluctant to join a political organisation and most likely to engage with political issues that affect his/her lifestyle than respond to ideological and collective identities. Therefore, as Florence Faucher argues, many of the initiatives introduced by parties to respond to membership decline and these changing participatory preferences assume that the problem lies in the cost to benefit ratio for individuals, and 'that the solution lies in lowering barriers to individual

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<sup>38</sup> Scarrow, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–3.

participation’.<sup>39</sup> In evaluating the consequences of these reforms for both parties and representative democracy more generally, two questions arise. First, are these organisational changes an *accurate* response to changing norms of political participation? The second question, which is of a more normative character, is whether these reforms are an *appropriate* response to changing norms of political participation?

In the Australian context, a survey of voters’ attitudes to partisan engagement conducted in 2012 provides some evidence of the relationship between organisational change and community expectations (see Table 2). Fielded to a representative sample of over 1,200 Australian voters, the survey was designed by the author and administered by the market research company Newspoll through an online panel. Designed to reflect the views of the general population on the possibilities provided by party organisational reform, the survey asked respondents to indicate whether or not they might consider engaging in a number of party-related activities in the future.

**Table 2: Australians’ likelihood of engaging in party-related activities in the future (percentage of respondents)**

<b>Participatory Activity</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Can’t say</b>
Join or be a member of a political party	9	81	10
Participate in a community preselection to select a party’s candidate for parliament	17	71	12
Register as a support of a political party	18	70	12
Sign up to receive information from a political party by email or text message	21	69	10
Post an idea or comment on a political party website	29	58	13
Attend a forum on policy issues that mattered to you	33	53	14
Answer a survey or questionnaire from a political party about issues that mattered to you	64	25	10

N=1,230

Because the survey asked participants about their likely, rather than actual, political behaviour, overall rates of participation are likely to be marginally inflated. However, a number of interesting trends emerge amongst the various engagement items. Unsurprisingly, joining a party is the least popular method of engagement among respondents, with only 9 per cent indicating that they would be likely to do so in the future. By contrast, respondents were twice as likely to register as a supporter,

<sup>39</sup> Florence Faucher, ‘New forms of political participation. Changing demands or changing opportunities to participate in political parties?’, *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, July 2015, p. 421.

although the total percentage was still only 18 per cent. A majority of survey respondents (64 per cent) were likely to engage in only one partisan activity in the future—answering a survey from a political party about issues that mattered to them. General interest in participating in primaries (17 per cent) and receiving information from a party (21 per cent) was also low. Around one-third of survey participants expressed interest in engaging with parties by posting a comment on a party website (29 per cent), and attending a policy forum (33 per cent).

### **The parties of the future?**

The relationship between political parties and their members and supporters, as well as the relationship between the demands for political participation and the opportunities provided, are both symbiotic. In many cases the two cannot be separated, as ‘when parties have focused on recruiting a specific type of member they have actually contributed to transform what party membership meant’.<sup>40</sup> This observation raises the second of the two questions just posed—notwithstanding the accuracy of parties’ organisational reform processes, are they appropriate? And what kind of party will they produce in the future? What do they say of the future of party democracy?

One of the most prominent themes that I have noticed in my time researching parties is the reluctance of political parties, in the way in which they describe and justify their reforms, to depart from the modern party as anything but a membership organisation. At the same time, however, the concept of membership itself has also been evolving in several important ways, which all tend to blur the distinction, *in practice*, of the boundaries of the party organisation—through the introduction of alternate forms of affiliation (such as supporters), granting decision-making rights to non-members, policy consultations with the broader public and the appropriation of issues, rather than ideologically based community politics campaigns. In this way, political parties can still maintain their status as ‘membership organisations’, and benefit from the legitimacy and resource benefits that accrue from a base of supporters, but the nature of the organisational link that members create changes as a result.

As illustrated by the survey evidence just presented, whilst a significant minority of citizens indicate that they will engage with political parties through new channels of participation in the future, there is no guarantee that the party supporter will become a sustained or active follower in the future. Indeed, the very nature of the reforms to decision-making processes around key party functions presume that individuals will ‘dip in’ and ‘dip out’ of engagement as it suits them.

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 413.

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On the one hand, these new individualised links and intermittent participatory practices are not so different from patterns of membership participation that have characterised political parties in the past.<sup>41</sup> Comparative studies have shown that the majority of party members are, for the most part, inactive. This has remained a relatively constant trend even after party members have demanded, and been given, greater participatory opportunities.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, however, Faucher warns that ‘when parties focus on issues at the expense of building a collective identity, they may inadvertently contribute to the very problem they seek to solve: demobilisation’.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the rise of new political parties on the far left and right of the political spectrum and the mass mobilisation of citizens in democracies such as Greece and Spain in response to the global economic crisis and migration flows have demonstrated the continuing importance of class, inequality and economic cleavages. For social democratic parties in particular, the strategy of dismantling collective identities and affiliation to concentrate on individual, issues-based engagement may have underestimated the continuing relevance of these issues, and in the process left a large group of disaffected citizens by the wayside.

To provide some final thoughts on these issues and on the consequences of party reform, it seems appropriate to return to the reforms to the UK Labour Party leadership selection process introduced at the very beginning of this lecture. Two key messages were delivered when the reforms were announced that: ‘parties need to reach out far beyond their membership’ and the ‘need to change the party so that we are in a better position to change the country’. Were these reforms successful in achieving these goals? Were they able to reconcile the demand for new participatory opportunities with existing party structures?

The new process for selecting the party leader was used for the first time following the resignation of Ed Miliband in May 2015, after the party’s general election defeat. Overall, 422,664 voted in the Labour leadership election, comprising 245,520 members, 105,598 registered supporters and 71,546 trade union affiliates. In 2016 this increased to 506,438. Corbyn was elected with around 60 per cent of the overall vote each time. As a measure of attracting support for the party, increasing membership and, by implication, responding to a desire for new opportunities for partisan engagement, the reforms appear to have been highly successful. At the end of December 2013, the party’s membership stood at 190,000. In July 2016, financial membership was over 500,000.

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<sup>41</sup> Scarrow, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>42</sup> van Haute and Gauja (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>43</sup> Faucher, *op. cit.*, p. 421.



The leadership contest also provides several insights into the consequences of ‘reaching out beyond the membership’. The 2015 process attracted significant controversy when *Telegraph* readers were encouraged to join the Labour Party as registered supporters to vote for Corbyn, in order to ‘consign Labour to electoral oblivion’.<sup>44</sup> Amongst allegations of ‘entryism’, several high-profile Labour figures, such as Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and David Miliband intervened during the contest to urge voters not to vote for Corbyn.<sup>45</sup> Editorialising in the *Observer*, Tony Blair commented that ‘the Corbyn thing is part of a trend’—‘There is a politics of parallel reality going on, in which reason is an irritation, evidence a distraction, emotional impact is king and the only thing that counts is feeling good about it all’.<sup>46</sup>

In light of the influx of members and supporters to the UK Labour Party, there was significant conjecture during the campaign, and debate has ensued after the contest, as to whether Corbyn actually represents the party’s support base, or is the choice of a vocal minority of activists. Corbyn is regarded by many senior political figures as a radical democratic socialist, holding policy ideas that are dangerous for the party and for Britain as a whole. Others see the election of Corbyn as a breath of fresh air, and a real shift in engaging people in party politics. It has been described as ‘a democratic explosion unprecedented in British politics’, and a ‘spontaneous campaign that erupted out of nowhere, powered by grassroots volunteers across the country’.<sup>47</sup> Ray Collins’ suggestion at the 2013 Labour Party conference—that we need to change the party ‘so that we are in a better position to change the country’—has particular resonance here, though perhaps not in the way that the architects of the reforms intended.

In the 2015 contest, support for Corbyn was highest amongst registered supporters (84 per cent), followed by trade union supporters (58 per cent) and finally, party members (50 per cent). In 2016 support amongst members and union affiliates rose to 60 per cent and dropped to 70 per cent amongst registered supporters. Together, what these voting patterns suggest is that the outcome of the contest was influenced in large part by those who joined in the months leading up to the vote (either as members or

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<sup>44</sup> Toby Young, ‘Why Tories should join Labour and back Jeremy Corbyn’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 2015.

<sup>45</sup> BBC News, ‘Labour leadership: Gordon Brown says party must be credible’, 16 August 2015; Rowena Mason, ‘David Miliband: electing Jeremy Corbyn risks creating one-party Tory state’, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-33950405>.

<sup>46</sup> Tony Blair, ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s politics are fantasy – just like Alice in Wonderland’, *The Guardian*, 30 August 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/29/tony-blair-labour-leadership-jeremy-corbyn>.

<sup>47</sup> Seumas Milne, ‘Jeremy’s Corbyn’s surge can be at the heart of a winning coalition’, *The Guardian*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/commentisfree/2015/aug/19/jeremy-corbyn-coalition-labour>; ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s victory has already transformed politics’, *The Guardian*, 17 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/16/jeremy-corbyn-politics-labour-leader-election>.

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supporters), rather than by long-standing party members. However, it does not necessarily follow that activists were disenfranchised as a result, or that the outcome produced an ‘unrepresentative’ or ‘undemocratic’ result. What it does, however, indicate is that even within individualised party structures, groups can still find ways to mobilise collectively to achieve influence but that they must work creatively to reach larger numbers of citizens. If the Labour leadership’s intention was to silence activists in a sea of ‘moderate’ voices by opening up and democratising the party, they may have received more than they bargained for.

To conclude, I pose the question: in a climate of membership decline, are party reforms designed to re-invigorate the normative ideals of the mass party model of representation, or has the breakdown of membership (coupled with social change) created a climate conducive to reforms that might fundamentally alter the way in which parties connect citizens and the state. While the UK Labour leadership example and many others discussed today suggest that parties continue to hedge their bets by appealing to both traditional organisational structures and new participatory processes, once reforms that seek to ‘open up’ the party in various ways have been implemented, it is very hard to turn back. At the same time as party reforms aim to respond to a new breed of political citizen, the high-profile campaigns associated with primaries, policy consultations, supporters’ networks et cetera work to potentially create a new set of normative ideals and change citizens’ expectations of how they might associate with parties. The consequences of party reform therefore extend well beyond rule changes and well beyond the parties themselves.



**Question** — Thank you for that fantastic talk. I would like to know a bit more about the relationship of those movement-type organisations in the United Kingdom, which seem to be underpinning the rise and success of Jeremy Corbyn, with the Labour Party?

**Anika Gauja** — Very briefly, what the Labour leadership selection process has done is enable groups, whether they be within the political party or outside the party, to organise collectively to influence the outcome of the election. I think this is really interesting and ironic in many ways in how it relates to the original intention of the reform. If we look at it literally, it was to open up the political party. If we think about it cynically and strategically, many would argue that these reforms were implemented in order to increase the power of the leadership. Now at that time that was Ed Miliband and his supporters. So really in proposing the reforms and seeing them

through I think the party and the leadership has bitten off a lot more than it can chew. It has centralised the power of the leader—not the leader that it wanted potentially—but it has also created, ironically, a process that, by opening up the boundaries of what constitutes a supporter, gives groups the ability to collectively organise to join the party and influence an outcome. So I think that it has created a certain permeability between the political party and the variety of different movement organisations which have mobilised to support Corbyn.

**Question** — Is it possible that the reduction in membership is because there is very little difference between political parties now? You really need a very serious issue to galvanise people into moving into a party, as is happening in Austria now, for example, where they are moving to the extreme far right.

**Anika Gauja** — The question went to the fact that there is very little difference now between political parties. That has been the established logic of looking at parties and party systems for the last 20 years: because political parties are vote-seeking organisations they tend to target the median voter, which means that their policies inevitably converge. But I think we have seen in the last five or so years since the global financial crisis a reintroduction of many of the old social and economic cleavages that were seen to have been diluted over the last 20 years. So we have these issues that are remobilising and re-engaging citizens, but parties need to work out a way to actively respond to them and incorporate them in their agendas. One way they can do that is through individualising their processes. In some ways I think populist parties present a real challenge to established political parties in this regard as well. They ostensibly champion direct democracy and claim to express the will of the people, and because they focus on the leader and his or her policy wishes, they are much more flexible and able to respond quickly to what they see as citizen demands. So I think that these new parties are posing a challenge to established political parties but they are also presenting an opportunity because they divide society in such a way that it becomes important for people to re-engage in democratic processes.

**Question** — I was interested that you mentioned the German example, but you did not mention the French example. I am particularly interested in that as I am a dual national, French and British, and I shall be able to vote electronically in the forthcoming primary for the French presidential election. This is a completely free vote. In other words, I have never been a member of a political party and all I have to do is pay €2 for each round of the vote and I also have to subscribe to a rather wishy-washy statement to the effect that I support republicanism, republican institutions and so on. I think this is quite an interesting example because, as you undoubtedly know, the former French President is the president of the party, although of course in France

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he doesn't sit in parliament, but it is probably unlikely that he will be chosen as the candidate in the primary.

**Anika Gauja** — I will take most of that as a comment because I think that does provide a really nice example that I did not have time to touch on. The French Socialist Party and its primary is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, I have been looking very carefully at all of the party documents when these initiatives are actually implemented and what is really interesting to see is just how much they defer, quite blindly, to the experiences of the United States. What happened in Obama's campaign is seen as the holy grail; primaries are seen as the holy grail of democratic participation. Now that was all well and good up to this year and what we have seen in terms of the primary race in the Republican Party but also the presidential election more generally. So that is one interesting example in that even France deferred to the US as being the holy grail of democratic participation. The other interesting aspect is that paying € or £ to vote in primary elections actually constitutes a really important source of income for political parties that are floundering in terms of being able to gather resources from the public. The French Socialist Party earned more than €1 million in running its first primary. I suspect the UK Labour Party made a handsome profit as well from billing its supporters to vote in both of Corbyn's leadership elections.

**Question** — Regarding the issue of funding of political parties, I am wondering what the implications are for public funding of political parties. At present, if a political party doesn't have parliamentary representation, one of the conditions is the number of members of that political party. I am wondering whether that could perhaps in the future move to the concept of 'supportership'. If I remember correctly, the issue that resulted in the conviction, and later acquittal, of Pauline Hanson, was that very distinction between members and supporters of the One Nation party.

**Anika Gauja** — Your question raises a very interesting point about formal notions of party membership defined as somebody signing a piece of paper saying that they are a member of that political party. In Australia establishing a political party at the Commonwealth level requires 500 members. Now we might think 500 members is pretty easy to achieve, but these days it is actually not, particularly if you are registering a party as a state organisation in every state. I think that, given the way in which parties are talking about their support bases in terms of 'supporters' rather than 'members', we might see a shift to parties trying to claim resources or claim registration on the basis of signatures of supporters rather than formal party memberships. On the question of public funding of party campaigns, I think that will continue into the foreseeable future and be done in tandem with trying to reinvigorate grassroots funding in crowd-sourced political campaigns.

If we move towards a system of primaries in the future, I think the question of who is going to resource them is really interesting. In the UK, when the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats were elected to government, they actually made a pitch to fund 200 all-postal primaries for parliamentary candidate selection contests. That failed, but it was an attempt to get resources from the state to pay for these activities. In other cases it really shifts the responsibility for fundraising from the party to the candidate. Parties can elect to put caps on primary selection contests, but it is also seen, again drawing from US experience, as a very valuable exercise where candidates learn campaigning skills and learn to fundraise. So a lot of the motivation for implementing this comes not simply from opening up engagement but from bringing resources and bringing money in.

**Question** — Early in your talk you referred to the decline of political parties and you referred to people turning to other kinds of organisations. Now one example of that in Australia would be GetUp, which has a large electronic base and seems to be able to raise a lot of support, including financial support, and significantly influence the political debate on a range of issues. I would be interested in your thoughts on the implications for the political process of these kinds of organisations that play a part in the political debate but do not in fact participate in the electoral process. On a second point, you referred to parties opening up to participation, but I think most of your examples referred to parties of the left. Can you comment on why parties on the right are not engaging in the same opening up process?

**Anika Gauja** — On the first question relating to other types of political organisations and the implications for democracy, I think there are a number of perspectives you can take on it. The first is: the more the better, the more the merrier. If organisations like GetUp allow citizens to express their political preferences and to participate in what they think is a meaningful way in politics, then that contributes to the health of the political system. There are different practices, as you said, for how these organisations then contribute to elections and to election campaigning. In New South Wales, for example, a distinction is drawn between these groups and political parties in terms of the funding that is received and the amount they can spend on campaigns where we clearly, in terms of formal electoral politics, have a two-tier system: parties and candidates at the top level and third-party campaigners at the bottom level.

The second divide in the academic literature is between seeing these groups as competitive or cooperative—competing for individuals' political participation. Political parties have not really responded to shifting participatory demands and organisations like GetUp are modelled on those changing demands, which points to the fact that parties may well be losing out in terms of their processes. I have only

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looked at the Greens, but the overlap between Greens membership and GetUp membership suggests that people who are politically inclined are actually members of both of those organisations. So it is not necessarily a case of one or the other; it is a broader social capital issue. If you are more likely to be active in one organisation, you are more likely to join a political party. So the idea that it is a competitive contest might not actually play out in practice.

**Question** — One of the things that you highlighted is the tension between bringing members in and parties retaining control. I was interested in your discussion about how candidates in these processes are becoming more personalised. Are party elites worried that, as their marketing strategies become increasingly personalised, they might actually lose control to their candidates as well?

**Anika Gauja** — You have certainly highlighted a really interesting tension there and I think political parties are still feeling their way through these different processes, as a lot of different advocacy and political organisations are. That issue of control is not necessarily something specific just to party organisations; it also extends into the advocacy and social movement sectors as well. In terms of reconciling it, the example that I raised of community organisation initiatives in the UK Labour Party really highlights that tension, and that is a tension that is going to grow as social media becomes more prominent.

One of the things that I didn't mention but that I think is particularly interesting is that, with platforms like Facebook and NationBuilder, it is relatively easy for candidates to establish and to create an account. By the same token, what you then do is outsource the responsibility for maintaining that account, outsource a lot of the way in which the message is distributed to people on the network to the organisation itself. So in a way you have a commercialisation of a lot of the campaigning functions as well, which not only creates problems of autonomy from the candidate vis-à-vis the party perspective but also problems of autonomy from the candidate vis-à-vis the party and the reliance on the commercial provider in these situations.

**Question** — One of the most striking things about the election of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK has been a kind of de-legitimisation of the parliamentary wing, because the attitude of the parliamentary wing to his candidacy was very well known throughout the UK before the event. I was wondering if you would comment on that.

**Anika Gauja** — I think that is certainly the case and I think the Labour Party in the UK throughout its history has gone through periods where, like many socialist democratic parties, it has struggled with the relationship between the parliamentary wing and the broader party organisation. I think that for the most of the 80s, the 90s

and 2000s, particularly under people like Tony Blair, the parliamentary wing gained increasing importance and separated itself in terms of policy and in terms of strategic direction from the party's base. On one hand Corbyn could be seen as a correction of this particular phenomenon; on the other hand he could be seen as a dangerous precedent where the party membership gains control over some of the functions that the parliamentary party should more properly control. All of the questions today have raised really difficult issues that I don't immediately have answers to. All I can say is that we are seeing that parties everywhere are grappling with these issues. The consequences have been that, yes, organisations are trying to open themselves up—they are getting more members; they are getting more supporters. But that tension between supporters and the traditional party membership is really apparent and parties have to find a way of dealing with it in the future.