
Trends in the Australian Party System*

Paul Reynolds

Introduction

Political parties have for so long been an integral part of modern liberal democracies that one is apt to take them, if not for granted, then as a given in the landscape of politics. The party system in Australia, in embryonic form, predates Federation, although its rapid rise after 1901 is both a cause and a consequence of the federal process. It is one of the supreme ironies of federation in Australia that the Constitution was written by men who constituted the final generation of non-party politicians. In other words, the late 1890s was the last time possible for the Constitution to have been written *sans* parties. That having been said, the document proved to have been so flexibly drafted that lack of formal and constitutional recognition neither inhibited the rise by the parties to dominate the polity, nor did its operations and application by the High Court prevent their on-going activity, much less threaten their legitimacy as cognate players in the political process.

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The formation and role of political parties

The number and reach of political parties in Australia over the past 120 years has been remarkable. We tend to think of the three permanent ‘Majors’—ALP, Liberal and Nationals—plus a couple of add-on ‘Minors’ as the sum total as these represent the permanent players. However, at the state and local levels parties have a rich history of formation, operation, decline and fall, or, maybe, morphing into another stage of political evolution. Two observations then seem warranted.

First, parties are formed when a section of society feels that *it has a claim on the political and decision making processes of the state which is not being addressed by current persons or organisations*. The ‘Majors’ of course represent this proposition as text book cases, especially the ALP mobilising working class consciousness¹ and the Nationals giving political expression to ‘countrymindedness’.² (Aitkin, 1977,1982). On the other hand the Liberals/Nationalists/UAP were parliamentary organised parties without any durable mass base. While the latter was incorporated by Robert Menzies in 1944, the modern day Liberal Party bares many of the hallmarks of an organisation constructed from the top down. Nevertheless, in class terms, it makes sense to view the Liberals as a case of middle class mobilisation, or at least the middle class as it was comprised in the first half of the twentieth century.

Second, in the 1960s, when I was an undergraduate, and the political science discipline was being established in this part of the world, we were taught that the difference between political parties and pressure groups was that the latter, whether instrumental or promotional, did not seek office, preselect candidates or become involved in the electoral processes; or if they did, only as a tactic to further their aims. As well they were sectoral with limited policy horizons. The former, however, sought office, had a broad whole-of-government approach to policy and were in the business of holding and wielding power rather than merely influencing its disposition in a limited direction.

From the perspective of 40 years or so such a taxonomy seems overly rigid, seeking hard and fast boundaries where none truly exist. The line between the two types of organisations has become extremely blurred, especially in respect to minor parties. These latter have no realistic expectations of gaining power, seldom have a ‘big picture’ policy agenda and, even if they do, this is not what they are recognised for. Should they be successful in gaining Upper House representation, they are apt to behave as pressure groups depending on who holds power in these chambers. Conversely, major, permanent and institutionalised lobby groups certainly will interact with the governmental processes in the guise of, as modern parlance has it, ‘stakeholders’ but this, while vital, will be only one set of their multitude of agendas and activities. The interplay of such forces, moreover, is maximised in a city such as Canberra, a dedicated federal capital whose chief (sole?) task is national governance.

¹ D.W. Rawson ‘The Life Span of Labor Parties,’ *Political Studies* vol. XVII, no. 3, 1969.

² D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*. Canberra, ANU Press, 1977; and *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, 2nd ed. Canberra, ANU Press, 1982.

Functions performed by the party system

The most important explanation for the durability of the parties is that, simultaneously, they perform a variety of functions, doing so economically, skilfully and purposefully. For convenience I have listed six, although not in any order of importance:

- (1) Policy formation and articulation;
- (2) Recruitment of political activists;
- (3) Training for leadership through internal party mechanisms and parliamentary service;
- (4) Operating as electoral machines;
- (5) Providing for, and facilitating, the circulation of political elites via the transfer of power;
- (6) Demarcating differing ideological positions within the polity.

If this were an undergraduate lecture I would now discuss each point in some detail to give a sense of the complexity of the process. However, in this instance I want to observe that each of these roles has, over time, experienced profound change and metamorphosis. For example, parties do not now rely only on their internal processes to devise and propound policy, rather they draw policy inputs from an array of sources and process these according to the party's practises and lore. Recruitment of activists has become a specialised activity as, after the 1960s the old mass memberships gave way to cadres, many recruited as university students and drawn from the sandpit of university union politics. Leaders are no longer folk heroes like John Curtin or patricians like Robert Menzies, but are apt to be made and unmade by opinion poll results and feedback from news media commentaries, including the incessant and mindless clamour of talk back radio and its 'shock jocks'. As Emeritus Professor Joan Rydon was wont to observe, every year, somewhere in Australia, people are voting. This means that the parties are constantly on 'election alert' with all that this implies in funding, planning and resources. The leaders of the 'Majors' never survive election defeat, while even victory may not necessarily result in continuation in office (e.g. cases as disparate as Thatcher, Hawke and Bjelke-Petersen). The circulation of elites is a constant, either through election results or, more rarely, on the floor of the House. That said, even the most casual perusal of the history of state and federal elections show that they mostly serve to confirm governments in office and only occasionally (federally four times since 1969) change governments.

Not only then is the party system durable, it is so because it is sustained by even more durable patterns of partisanship. The role of ideology in the Australian party system has always been contentious, but one can discern a sub stratum of ideas (to put it no stronger) in the formation of both Labor and the Liberals. While it may be true that pragmatism will always win out, the corollary question must be, 'Pragmatism for what?', an indication that ideology can rescue the party system from sterile short term activity.

Whither the party system?

In light of the durability of the party system over the past century and more, it seems altogether unreasonable to question its future as a *system* if only because its existence

and continuity is testimony to its ability to adapt to social and economic change which has, in turn, shifted the balance of political forces within the parameters of the 'Majors' and their politics. This notwithstanding it is useful to delve below the surface of apparent functionality in the hope of discerning trends which may well exert significant influence on future directions within the overall system.

First, it is as well to recall that the basis for the Australian party system is the state branch. Indeed it was not until the 1960s that the 'Majors' established federal secretariats and not until the 1970s that the state branches surrendered to their federal counterparts the running of national election campaigns. Despite these developments the state branches enjoy considerable autonomy and power over their own affairs. They preselect and deselect candidates; they train generations of politicians at federal, state and local government levels; they operate as significant fundraisers, especially if in Government; they send delegates to national conferences and executives and manifest themselves as their parties' sinews of war.

While, in theory, the Liberal federal executive can intervene in the affairs of a state branch, this is comparatively recent development and has never occurred. I am not aware of any such power in the National Party and, even in the case of Labor which possesses this power, it was exercised three times between 1970 and 1981 and never thereafter. The occasions when the ALP federal executive did so act depended crucially on the factional balance then obtaining on the executive.

Further to this general point, the state of the parties federally, and hence the party system, depends on how the parties are travelling at the sub-national level. The current situation where all states and territories are controlled by the ALP, which has been out of power federally since 1996, is almost unprecedented. (There was a brief period in the late 1960s when Labor was out of power in all jurisdictions). This then gives rise to two further considerations. The first is that, as federations go, Australia is not all that pluralistic, certainly insofar as race, language, religion and regional diversities are concerned. However, precisely because of this it can be argued that our interstate differences are more subtle and nuanced with each party branch taking on its own characteristics and folkways appropriate to that state's political culture. While it would require thorough in depth investigation and research to explore the detailed working out of these processes, it means, at the very least, that a good deal of state/territory diversity lurks under the generic party labels.

The second consideration is that the state branches hold the key to their party's on-going credibility and durability. To take the case of the Nationals, in their first and founding state, WA, they no longer exist, at least for federal purposes. Notwithstanding their ambitious name they exist, as a force at all, only because they have a political presence in NSW, Queensland and, to a much lesser extent, in Victoria. A further case concerns the Liberals in Queensland. They ceased to be a credible force in state politics in 1983 (save for a brief and impermanent revival, 1995–98). They have only sustained themselves as the federal Liberal's northern post box because, in South East Queensland one voter in five chooses to vote Labor (i.e. Beattie) at state level and Liberal federally.³ Should this pattern not survive 2007, the

³ D. Cheverton, 'Gemini Voters, A case study of voting at federal and state elections in Queensland 1992–2004', unpublished MS held by author [2005].

Liberals in Queensland, at both levels, will be in grave danger of decline into total irrelevancy.

My second wider point concerns the circulation of leaders and elites. While it is self-evidently true that Australia is a stable democracy and that legitimacy of governments or leaders is not an issue (1975 being the inevitable exception), it is somewhat sobering to recall that, of federal leaders and prime ministers, since 1945, only Menzies retired at his own time and of his own choice. All others were defeated electorally or cut down in their party room, or both. This observation then leads to a further consideration on leadership itself. The experience of the federal Liberals with the leadership issue from 1983 to 1996, and that of the ALP since 1996 shows how hard it can be for parties out of office to bring their leadership cycle into conjunction with public expectations when these latter are established by the government of the day by deploying its considerable resources. This then is all the more problematical because of the evolution of the prime minister's position into a presidential style of office with all the accompanying concentration of power, effort, resources and attention. But the paradox remains, while the trappings of office bespeak permanency, the position of any incumbent is, at best, transitory. With no hereditary monarch as head of government (rather than head of state), and without a president elected at large, limited to a number of specific terms, the bestowal and withdrawal of leadership will remain with the parliamentary parties where, in the absence of a separation of powers between the executive and legislature, it will ever reside.

My third and final point concerns the interplay between the major and minor parties. There were no minor parties when, in 1948, proportional representation (PR) was introduced for Senate elections. However, with the advent of the Democratic Labor Party in 1955, two electoral trends were established. The first was that a minor party with a disciplined support base could exert a totally disproportionate influence on electoral outcomes through the direction of its preferences. In the DLP's case it actually saved Coalition Governments in 1961 and 1969. The second was that PR created an opportunity for parliamentary representation via the Senate and this, in turn, meant the chance to hold the balance of power. Both trends survived the demise of the DLP in 1974, the difference being that there have been several claimants for the balance of power in more recent times including an individual in former Senator Harradine. While the current minor parties are not as bloody-minded over preferences as was the DLP, the major parties have to build their minor counterparts into their electoral tactics in ways unknown in a first-past-the-post system. The widespread negative reaction, expressed in 2004 when then Coalition took control of the Senate suggested that, over the previous quarter of a century it had become a popular belief that Government *should not* control the Senate. It will be interesting to see if and how far, such sentiment translates this election year.

Conclusion

The party system in Australia has developed its own dynamic, has socialised successive generations into support for its protagonists and has, for many, become co-terminus with the whole political system. The party system itself has profited from

two institutional changes: namely compulsory voting which frees the parties from the tedium and expense of having to ‘get out the vote’ and, for the public, has become a civic virtue; while the other development, public funding, guarantees to all who qualify, a financial base, thereby giving the ‘Minors’ more room to operate than they could otherwise expect.

The warning then, insofar as there is one, is that the federal parties are only as strong as their state bases. The first half of the last century was characterised by instability in both the Labor Party and urban non-Labor. The ALP split three times between 1916 and 1955, while the latter had to be re-invented four times between 1910 and 1944. By contrast the second half of the twentieth century was marked by major party stability and minor party amoeba-like formation and re-formation. One distinctiveness that the Australian party system has compared to its NZ, UK and Canadian counterparts is the formation and survival of the Nationals. While the ‘Majors’ can be expected to go through their electoral cycles as mirror images of each other, an indication of the on-going health of the party system can be discerned from the size, vitality and success of the ‘Minors’ which, collectively, measure the contentment, or otherwise, of the electorate with the party system.



Question — Professor you finished up talking about the ongoing health of the party system, yet I think it’s well accepted that party membership is in decline. You talked originally about the 1960s or earlier when party membership was quite substantial. Today it is quite small. What do you think the implications of that are for the party system and for the health of the democratic system?

Paul Reynolds — That’s a good question and it’s something students quite frequently raise as well. Until about the 1960s and 70s, we were a society where people joined and belonged to organisations, churches, trade unions, political parties, boy scouts, hundreds of those sort of community organisations—now all that has disappeared. In fact Professor Hughes, who was your lecturer last month, once observed to me when he was the Electoral Commissioner, that he could chart the decline of organised religion in Australia. I said: ‘What, from the Australian Electoral Commission?’ He said ‘Yes Paul, there are no Sunday school halls left that we can use for polling booths. We have to use primary schools now.’ In the decline of public membership of voluntary groups it would be quite amazing if political parties were exempt from this.

Anecdotally, about 20 years ago, if students wanted to become active in the political processes, they went and joined pressure groups, such as Amnesty International. What I’ve noticed now is that the political activists I teach now are going back to the political parties because they see the parties as career paths. So what the parties have lost in terms of foot soldiers, they have gained in officers. Whether you call that a quality shift or not, I don’t know, but the mass-based party is a thing of the past, as is the mass based almost anything, fill in the blank. But so long as the parties are recruiting activists, training them as the key political players and collectively I use the

term political elites, then the party system will survive, but not in the sense of the old mass-based party where everybody turned up on a windy Monday night once a month to fight about who owned the Gestetner or who's going to sell the chook raffle tickets—that's gone.

It may be that the parties will suffer in another sense in that they won't have people available to hand out the how to vote cards, but my suspicion is that in quite a number of instances they are already paying people to do that. They are not depending on local branch members because they haven't got any, so they can give it to students or schoolboys or something like that to do that job.

Of course compulsory voting really means that the parties don't have to have mass memberships. In Britain or New Zealand where voting is voluntary, a hell of a lot of the foot soldier work of the branch members is to make sure that potential supporters of your party are on the electoral roll, and then on election day go and get them and physically take them to the polling booths. Now compulsory voting, which started in Queensland in 1914 and was adopted by the Commonwealth in 1924, has never been seriously questioned except occasionally by a few right wing Liberals and the parties want it and people think it's a civic duty. But my American students who are here on study abroad schemes are horrified that we compel people to vote.

Question — I heard on public radio recently that the description of the two American parties was that they were empty shells to be filled by the interests of lobby groups. In Australia, partly because of the mass base disappearing, do you think that's an adequate description of where we are now or where we're likely to go? Will the political parties in the absence of a hard left or right just become empty shells fillable by pressure groups or lobby groups?

Paul Reynolds — The short answer is no, it won't, because the party system in the two countries are not strictly comparable. The parties in America are not mass-based but a collection of pluralist interests. So the Democratic Party, for Hispanics, blacks, feminists, gays, blue collar workers and so on, is an umbrella parties. Our parties are much more exclusivist than that—they're not umbrella parties. Consequently in Australia the party discipline is much tighter and that means amongst other things that the parties are not susceptible to being captured by lobby groups and pressure groups and other stake-holders. These people can try to get their ideas and agendas on the party's policy priority list, but the party retains control over its policy agenda and no political leadership in any political party would surrender that. Also, because the parties in Australia are more ideologically defined than they are in America, certain lobbyists will gravitate to one party and not to another, which means that the two major parties each have their own client groups and the interplay between the party and its client group will be an ever-changing relationship according to the exigencies of the time and of the processes that are around at the time of the rise and decay of issues.

It would be foolish to rule it out forever, but I think the structure of the party system and the interplay between the client groups and the parties in Australia would preclude us becoming Americanised to that extent.

Question — I'd like to invite your comments on two theories which we commonly hear these days. Firstly the theory that voters like to balance one party at the federal level with the opposite party at state level; and secondly the theory that ideology has disappeared from politics at state level at least and that voters simply choose which is the best party for service delivery.

Paul Reynolds — Daniel Cheverton, whose work I've quoted, at least suggests that at least that is happening in Queensland. On the other hand Queensland is a peculiar state in that split ticket voting, which is what the Americans call the phenomenon you've described, was always a viable option for non-Labor voters, because what they tended to do when they had the opportunity was to vote Liberal federally and National at state level because you were assured victory in both if you wanted to keep Labor out. What we now have since 1989 in Queensland with the post-Fitzgerald era, is that people have crossed party lines and they're doing a balancing act. It's a minor phenomenon in the sense that Cheverton suggested only one voter in five in south east Queensland was doing this. Commentators have picked this up in certain areas of Sydney as well. I'm not aware that there is much evidence for it anywhere else, so I think the theory needs more investigation and there may be something in it, but we just don't have the data yet to run with it. It would be a good PhD thesis, think about it.

In relation to your second question, I would doubt that political parties at the state level really did much to peddle ideology, except in very situationally specific instances, and here I return to my state of Queensland. The Labor Party was at its most radical in Queensland in the 1920s when it had a majority of four, and it amalgamated the Brisbane City Council, put in a state government insurance office, abolished the Legislative Council, abolished hanging, and ran butcher shops. This was a kind of utopian socialism if you like. If Joh Bjelke-Petersen could have spelt ideology I would have passed him and awarded him an honorary doctorate, but I don't think that ideology has ever figured much. Maybe in New South Wales from time to time, but populism has always had more currency as a political style at state level than ideology, and sure, you can morph populism into ideology but it's a pretty poor fit and I would suggest it's a style rather than an ideology.

But certainly the latter part of the point is well taken: the states are now seen as service delivery vehicles and there is an interesting instance of this. Largely that realisation has dawned on state populations with the advent of the GST, and one of my close friends, Dr David Hamill, who was Treasurer of Queensland from 1998 to 2001, produced a PhD thesis in record time (2½ years part time, which of course had the rest of our PhD students grinding their teeth in fury). David, when he retired from politics took all his papers from the Treasury Office home in Ipswich and then wrote a PhD. David was able to demonstrate very clearly that while the states have more money, they have far less control over it. So the GST has certainly been money bags for the states, but the money comes very tightly controlled from Canberra. So the states, yes, offer service delivery particularly in times of drought, water shortage, all that kind of stuff; that's the cutting edge of the service delivery. And you'll get more votes for promising a decent road than you will from propounding the necessity to have state-run butcher shops.

Question — I'd like to ask you a question about the difference between political parties. In the family where I grew up, politics were always well and truly over to the left, and my father always said to me: 'I want you to remember that the letters ALP stand for Alternative Liberal Party.' The point that he made was that there was no real fundamental differences between these two parties and that people were deluding themselves if they thought that there were. It was 50 years ago that my father mentioned that, and I'm wondering whether you see any fundamental differences. When you look at the statements of people like Mr Rudd, one of the very first statements he made was: "'believe in the market economy.' The word socialism, for example, is not mentioned. It's essentially two parties who argue about the management of the economy for those who own and control it—those who own businesses and especially those who own big businesses. I'd like to hear what your views are on whether you think that there are irreconcilable and deep differences between these two parties.

Paul Reynolds — It is a question that is frequently raised and it deserves a serious answer. I would start the answer by saying that there never were deep and irreconcilable differences of an ideological kind between the political parties from the 1890s onwards. There were always alternative ways of doing things. You have to remember that the first half of the twentieth century was essentially the struggle to develop and put in place the welfare state and there was only one party that was going to do that and that was the Labor Party. So the Labor Party got its distinctiveness for the first 50 years of its life because it had a fundamental goal and that was establishment of comprehensive welfare. This was what Rawson and others have meant by working class mobilisation.

Now what happened all over the western world after World War II was that the welfare state was established by left of centre parties, partly as a result of the hideous effects of the Great Depression. Conservative parties hopped on the band wagon in the 1950s and they were able to present themselves in Australia and the United Kingdom and America, New Zealand and Europe, as the true managers of the welfare state. They weren't going to dismantle the welfare state but they were going to run it according to business principles. And for about a generation Labor lost its way. It had done what it set out to do, now what was it going to do? You had books in the United Kingdom, for example *The Future of Socialism* by C.A.R. Crosland and *Must Labour Lose?* by Mark Abrams—these were periods of self doubt and some very profound self questioning on the left as to what to do now. So socialism in Australia only ever meant the establishment of the welfare state. Senator Hard-Left could bang on about Marxism, and for a time the Communists got a bit of airplay in the 30s and 40s, but the Labor Party wiped them out as any organised force in Australian politics.

So what we have now is another period of consensus. Globalisation, rationalisation of markets, market forces, free trade, this sort of stuff. After one hundred years, free trade is back as the orthodox belief-system of economists. So naturally enough the parties are going to pursue where there is least consensus. So of course the argument is going to be about who runs the show best, and the corollary of that is who profits the most. If you look for example at Howard's legislation on industrial relations, you can say that this is the most ideological right-wing government we've ever had in Australia, which is probably true. But Howard sells the industrial relations package as being beneficial to the vast majority of workers and that is where the debate is joined.

And it was ever thus in Australia; the debate is always joined on the outcomes, on the output, not on the input or the rationale. It's who gets what, when, why and how, as Robert Dahl famously articulated it in the 1950s.

You've got a situation therefore where the observable phenomenon is what governments produce and what governments do, and that's where the political argument is.

Question — Professor I believe that in Australia politics is different from in the United States and the United Kingdom because you get more dissent within the parliamentary system. With our tight way of control the parties, if you vote against the Labor Party you're out; the Liberal Party gives you a conscience vote if John Howard will allow you to have it. How will we go in the twenty-first century with such tight control? Are we going to lose some aspects of democracy?

Paul Reynolds — No, I don't think so, but I think again it comes down to the contextualisation of the question. Remember that the United Kingdom is not a federation. So it only has one parliament and that parliament has 650 members. With the best iron-clad discipline in the world, you're going to be herding cats with 650 people. Also in the United Kingdom, because the House of Commons is so large, more members will be no more than back benchers. Only a very tiny percentage of members will end up as ministers or anywhere on the political radar. And the House of Lords, because it contains the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, is only a delaying device, and they are trying to get rid of it. As the *Economist* said about the latest tranche of reforms to the House of Lords: 'Welcome to the eighteenth century.' That's one reason why party discipline in Britain seems not as tight as in Australia. It's a function of size.

Now in the United States, as I've already mentioned in response to an earlier question, the parties are coalitions of interests. So therefore the party discipline is much weaker and cross-party voting is something which is a way of life and is built into the political processes. It's always expected that there will be conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans and occasionally depending on the circumstances they will cross the floor.

In Australia, by contrast, we have small parliaments. The biggest house of parliament is the House of Representatives, with 150 members and you can go right down to the Tasmanian House of Assembly where there are about 27 members. Now in those circumstances it's much easier to control the behaviour of the politicians in parliament; and remember that the politicians are not controlled externally, they make their own rules in their caucuses and party rooms. That's where the dissent is ironed out and that's what you don't hear about because Chatham House rules are firmly enforced in caucus discussions. So the product therefore is solidarity and unity and presenting a united front to the public. This of course is facilitated very largely because 80 per cent of all parliamentary business is non-controversial. Governments only are governments of innovation generally speaking in their first term—thereafter they are governments of administration. This is what makes the Howard Government so different, because it has been innovative all the way through.

I might suggest here that political parties are captives of their own myths. The Labor Party myth is that Whitlam failed because he tried to do too much too quickly, so Labor governments ever after have been quite cautious. The Liberal Party's myth is that Fraser waited eight years to remake Australia in the conservative mould. So the tightness of the discipline can be seen as stifling democracy, but I prefer the analogy that it is like having two footy teams. They can only compete successfully if they're united and purposeful and aiming to win. As Jim Killen used to put it: 'Not all the best players are on the one team.' But I always like Paul Keating's reply to that: 'Our bastards are better than their good guys.'

Question — You have done the impossible. When you gave your description, I said: 'There is no future for the voters in this country. We'll have to wait for the Chinese to take us over and show how it can be done.'

Paul Reynolds — I can give you just a quick humorous analogy. I won't name the gentleman, although he is now dead, but it was said of a former Governor of Queensland, that if the Chinese landed today, he'd have plastic surgery tomorrow.

Question — Do you have any views on the funding for elections and the fact that the federal government give so much money per vote?

Paul Reynolds — Yes, that was an innovation that brought in with the last tranche of electoral reforms in 1984, and it was designed to do two things. One was to give the parties a public funding base where they would be accountable. They don't just get the dough for the votes, they've got to furnish all kinds of returns to the Electoral Commission and they're accountable. The second one was to obviate the danger a previous questioner referred to of having the parties captive of lobby groups. If the parties depend on the big end of town; corporate donations, trade unions, whatever, then they are in danger of being in thrall to those groups, either on specific or general grounds.

The other unintended consequence was, as I said, to give the minor parties a more secure financial base than they would otherwise have. Now those are the practicalities of it—that was the sort of pragmatic rationale for it. You can argue the morality of it until the cows come home. To use the example of my American study abroad students again: they think it's appalling that the state should give money to political parties. Some people would say that it's appalling that American politics is run by tobacco companies and the anti-abortion lobby. So you pay your money and you take your choice—the pun is intended. If you're going to have public funding, it is what it says: *public funding*. It is publicly accountable, the parties are accountable for the funding that they get. If you don't have public funding, and you say that this is an illegitimate thing for the taxpayer to be footing the bill, political parties can go and beat the bushes and get the money wherever they like, and no-one will never know what strings were attached to the money. Of course it's not an either/or situation, because the political parties do go out and solicit donations to top up the public funding, but with public funding they have to declare to the Electoral Commission who gave them money, and how much was given, and that's on the public record.

So the reforms of 1984 were intended to balance two sets of interests: to secure the parties on a financial basis without sleazy deals and also to give the minors a bit of

airplay. The fact that it isn't an issue in politics now and wasn't particularly controversial 20 years ago either, means that most people accept the rationale for public funding, provided the safeguards are in place.