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1
An Anthropological Approach to "Conventional Politics"

When I arrived in Britain in the mid-1990s, I was struck by the peculiarity of British political party conferences. These annual gatherings are familiar to any observer of British politics. For over a century, they have temporarily diverted attention away from Westminster and towards the seaside resorts of Britain. Every autumn, media attention is focused for about a month on internal party politics. British party conferences do not have the *gravitas* of party congresses in continental Europe where the emphasis is on crucial strategy decisions and executive renewal.[1] Nevertheless, they attract thousands of participants and are considered sufficiently important that all parties are prepared to divest substantial sums to hold such meetings in full media glare. It is virtually impossible to conceive of political life in Britain without thinking of party political life. One can argue that annual conferences contribute to reinforcing the central position of political parties because they highlight their extra-parliamentary existence and allow these organisations to address voters beyond the confines of specific electoral campaigns.

Conferences are taken for granted as a feature of British political life, which is perhaps why they are, at the same time, dismissed as internal affairs with little importance for the polity as a whole. This attitude has become so entrenched that observers of the British political scene have become oblivious to what remains one of the most intense periods of activity in the political year. This relative lack of interest is reflected in the few works that have been dedicated to them. There are two academic exceptions: Lewis Minkin published an exhaustive study of the Labour conference in 1978, and in 1989 Richard Kelly produced a study of the Conservative conference "system". Both focused on a single party. This project is different: I am interested in what these *apparently* archaic and arcane events reveal about particular ways of

thinking about politics and practising it. Rather than concentrate on a single organisation, I compare the three main parliamentary parties with the much smaller and politically marginal Green Party. Beyond the idiosyncrasies of individual parties (some of which I intend to show reveal specific "group styles"), conferences can also help us understand British modes of dealing with politics: they are windows into the transformations undergone by British parties and by British society since the 1990s. Conferences play a central role in the life of each party and are therefore crucial in any process of change. They adopt reforms; they effect, and reflect, change. I wish to invite the reader on a *détour* (Balandier, 1985) to the enchanted and un-chartered territories of off-season British seaside resorts.

Where there has been a strong impulse to demonstrate the hard scientific dimension of the discipline, political science has developed models imported from economics. Partly as a consequence of this, the concept of culture remains controversial within the field. Some have argued that "the analysis of group values or customs such as those associated with the term culture [is] irrelevant to political inquiry" and "symbolic displays and rhetorical practices are epiphenomenal" (Przeworski quoted by Wedeen, 2002: 714) or that culture is the "fallback to explain apparently irrational behaviour" (Kuper, 1999: 10). When culture is considered relevant, the concept is predominantly approached and operationalised in two ways. First, following Weber and Parsons, culture is said to be linked to "deeply held" values that shape action because they provide the ends towards which these actions are oriented. This allows a survey-based approach to culture-as-(relatively-fixed)-values that makes cross-national comparisons possible (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1990). Here, culture is given an explanatory role in comparative politics whilst numbers and regressions provide the impression that results are "objective", that is consistent with scientific standards. Such an approach misses the complexity of contexts of interactions and tends to reduce culture to cognitive items that can be more easily made explicit. Second, interpretativist approaches reject or at least wish to supplement such standards of verification in favour of plausibility and largely build from Geertz's concept of culture as symbolic action, emphasising the need for a "thick-description" of events and social contexts (Geertz, 1993; Scott, 2003; Welch, 1993), with a strong focus upon the underlying "meaning" of such actions. The danger with this latter approach lies in overlooking the processes by which ongoing practices and systems of meaning are constantly changing and thus in taking culture as a coherent body or homogeneous

system of meanings. Indeed, many "political scientists (...) think of culture as connoting fixed group traits" (Wedeen, 2002: 716). Such a conceptualisation of culture has been of little explanatory power and misses the diversity and the constant evolution of understandings, experiences, practices and interpretations within a group. Indeed, as Richard King puts it,

> cultures are not homogeneous and static entities or essences (...); rather they are historically evolving processes, which are distorted if they are reified. In so far as a culture persists, it is constantly subject to revisions, reinterpretations and transformations of one kind or another (King, 1999: 79).

I believe political science can learn from recent work in sociology and anthropology which takes culture as consisting of symbols and practices that help people create meanings for themselves. This move does not imply that there is an intrinsic, hidden structure of meaning that can be decoded by the outside observer.[2] The processes through which meanings are constructed involve experiences and interactions, and their effects. People are informed by conventions (Berger and Lückmann, 1984) but they also improvise, adapt and interpret them (de Certeau, 1990; Goffman, 1990).

It is not possible to study human societies in the same manner as we study the natural world precisely because, as Max Weber put it, man is suspended in webs of signification he has himself spun. Indeed, a narrow instrumentally rational reading of political behaviours misses the fact that human behaviour is multi-layered, culturally mediated and not admissible to a purely rationalist explanation in all instances. Moreover, it relies on the implicit idea that there is a universal underlying means/ends schema that governs actions and that culture shapes behaviours by defining what people want (Swidler, 1986: 274). It is more fruitful to see culture as a repertoire of prefabricated chains of actions (rather than individual acts) that can be strategically used according to circumstances. "People developing new strategies of action depend on cultural models to learn styles of self, relationships, co-operation, authority and so forth" (Swidler, 1986: 279) but on the other hand, there are often gaps between explicit norms and actual practices because culture does not impose a single unified pattern of action. Individuals and groups are "reluctant to abandon familiar strategies of action". Thus, they tend to construct their strategies from limited repertoires and appear to "cling to cultural values".[3]

Party conferences are not the place where collective beliefs are enacted but rather where some British political repertoires of action are elaborated and transmitted. Comparing these group styles points to the competing repertoires and ideologies articulated and promoted by different political parties. The resilience of the conference season reflects an attachment to political strategies revolving around parties in a representative democracy that is structured by the predominant role of Parliament. However, the weight of the executive in a dominant one-party-government has dramatically increased under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and then with Tony Blair. Since 1997, Labour has imposed tight discipline upon a huge majority in the House of Commons as well as its grassroots. Moreover, policy networks have opened up new spaces for public debate beyond Westminster. Conferences provide the framework in which new practices of political deliberation and communication can emerge. "When people are learning new ways of organising individual and collective action, practising unfamiliar habits until they become familiar, then doctrine, symbol and ritual directly shape action" (Swidler, 1986: 278). In other words, it is in periods of change that culture plays its most important role because it provides a form of traditional support and justification that is both resilient and flexible.

To gain a proper understanding of how British political parties have changed, one must consider broader trends within British society. Deference has been eroded through social mobility and the decline of class-based politics.[4] The Thatcher revolution facilitated the development of a new kind of entrepreneurial individualism, challenging traditional hierarchies and communities. Information technologies and mass media culture have contributed to a further individualisation through mass-marketing techniques. "Private enterprise" has become the dominant model for making sense of collectivities and social organisations. Individuals are seen as consumers and treated as such in all sectors of life from education to politics. From private businesses to universities, social services and local government (Le Galès, 2004; Newman, 2001; Power, 1999), the same approach to management applies, with its obsession with audits and standards. Like every other major organisation in modern Britain, political parties require a written framework document and a paper trail to establish a "benchmark" for accountability (Sklair, 2001). This cultural shift is exhibited in changing attitudes to authority, legitimacy and the self and reflects a move towards a highly rationalised and entrepreneurial conception of the human being (Rose, 1999). If party members have become stakeholders[5]

and citizens are now to be treated as consumers, then it is hardly surprising if their loyalty to political organisations is as limited as their loyalty to brands and outlets. How can one mobilise them for the public good (Hirschmann, 2002)?

The politics of rituals

If many political scientists are sceptical about how useful the concept of culture might be for understanding modern political practices, even more neglect the insights to be gained from anthropology.[6] In particular, it can be interesting to consider the symbolic dimensions of politics that sometimes escape the modern westerner's gaze precisely because of the tendency to become preoccupied with instrumental actions. Western cultural prejudices tend to associate rituals with far away, "primitive" groups while developed societies are seen as modern, rational and "disenchanted". However, "there can be no politics without symbols, nor without accompanying rites" (Kertzer, 1988: 181) and this also is true of modern societies. Political analysts sometimes seem to fear that talking about rituals might divert attention away from the "real world" of secularised societies or from the study of power[7] – as if power could be abstracted from its social embeddedness (Foucault, 1984) or as if rituals were not thoroughly infused with, and constitutive of, power relationships (Bell, 1992: 215; Bourdieu, 2001; Wedeen, 1998). Belief in the inherent rationality of mainstream western politics is so powerful that most political anthropologists search for an "Other" (Badie and Sadoun, 1996) or focus on the "margins", such as David Kertzer on the Italian Communists (1996), Marc Abélès (1989) on politics in rural France (Abélès, 1989) or myself (1999a) on the Greens. Few have followed the example of Abélès in studying mainstream political institutions such as the French *Assemblée Nationale* and the *European Parliament* (Abélès, 1999, 1992 respectively).

In this book, I propose to analyse mainstream parties partly in an attempt to demonstrate that the exoticism of non-instrumental and ritual practices is everywhere amongst us. My aim is to "exoticise" modern western polities and denaturalise the world that we would otherwise take for granted. I have turned my attention to Britain because as a native of France its political culture is both familiar and unfamiliar to me. This has allowed me to raise questions that might remain unformulated by a "native". The political culture of modern Britain, however, is sufficiently akin to my own background to gain an appreciation of subtle cultural

differences and different group styles within each organisation. It is indeed easier to see "strangeness" in the everyday political practices of "others":

> The famous anthropological absorption with the (to us) exotic (...) is, thus, essentially a device for displacing the dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us. (...) Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity (Geertz, 1993: 14).

Of course, this *détour* calls for a *retour* to one's own political culture and context with new questions and a fresher look at a world that for this reason can no longer be taken for granted. Sadly, there is not enough space to offer comparative reflections or a cross-national dimension to my analysis of British political parties. The breadth of such analysis would inevitably be to the detriment of its depth.[8]

Debates in anthropology about what constitutes ritual have been complex and contested (Bell, 1992, 1997). For the purpose of this analysis, I will take ritual to denote behaviour that is repeated, rule-bound, referring to ongoing traditions or otherwise invoking a reference point that transcends the narrow framework of a choosing and acting individual. It is executed with a sense of itself as a performance – as an event that is on display. Rituals have generally come to be understood as referring mainly to non-instrumental forms of action that have a clearly communicative dimension related to the use of symbols (Asad, 1993: 60; Bell, 1992: 25). There are a number of practices enacted at conference that can be analysed through the lens of ritual studies. With their repetitiveness, their set speeches and rules, their well-defined roles and decorum, British party conferences are more than mere customs or ephemeral performances of seaside gladiatorial jousting. Conferences are all the time being actively reinvented and transformed, associated with new symbols and new phases of representative government.

Like the question of which came first the chicken or the egg, the anteriority of myth or ritual has long been discussed. The dominant view – that myths are the source and inspiration of ritual behaviour – privileges the cognitive and belief-oriented aspects of human beings and implies that myths and symbols always pre-exist cultural performance. In contrast to this Geertzian approach, I will take the position (following in the tradition of anthropologists such as Robertson Smith, Talal Asad, Pierre Bourdieu and Catherine Bell) that embodied practices

are constitutive elements in the performative production and re-production of a set of internalised values. Ritual acts may have conscious or explicitly cognitive dimensions to them but what gives them their "affective" power lies in the fact that they operate at a largely "unconscious", embodied and performative level. Values and ideology are often taken as the cement, the *raison d'être* of political parties. However, studies of party activism have shown that activists ignore the details of political and economic theories that form the ideological basis of their party and only the most sophisticated amongst them can maintain consistency between such an ideology and the needs of their organisation (Barnes, 1968; Faucher, 1999a: 39). Values are the outcome of interactions between individuals and relate to rituals in so far as these collective and performative events help connect us with identities larger than ourselves (Elias, 2001).

Rituals "construct and inscribe power relationships" (Bell, 1997: 83) and are thus also interesting for what they do, rather than solely for what they mean. Too much effort has been put on the search for an abstract and overarching notion of ritual, argues Catherine Bell, whilst research should focus instead on what people do and how they do it in specific contexts (Bell, 1997: 82). According to Catherine Bell, ritual is

> part of a historical process in which past patterns are reproduced but also reinterpreted and transformed. In this sense, ritual is frequently depicted as a central arena for cultural mediation, the means by which various combinations of structure and history, past and present, meanings and needs, are brought together in terms of each other (Bell, 1997: 83).

In his studies of ritual in modern Italian politics, David Kertzer suggests that ritual "discourages critical thinking" (1988: 85) because it plays a major role in conferring legitimacy through the "naturalisation" of ways of behaving. "Through ritual, as through culture more generally, we not only make sense of the world around us, but we are also led to believe that the order we see is not of our own (cultural) making, but rather an order that belongs to the external world itself" (Kertzer, 1988: 85). It is therefore not surprising if observers of the British political scene are oblivious to the idiosyncratic nature of the British conference season. Lukes further argues that ritual helps "define as authoritative certain ways of seeing society: it serves to specify what in society is of special significance, it draws people's attention to certain forms of relationship and activity – and, at the same time therefore, it deflects their attention

from other forms, since every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing". Rituals in this view encourage the "internalisation of particular political paradigms" (Lukes, 1975: 302). They silence dissent and contribute to maintaining the *status quo*.

In a political context, the strategic use of such practices is all the more important as they can also subvert established hierarchies and patterns of action (Dirks, 1992; Turner, 1989a). Thus, beyond rituals themselves, we need to look at the "objectification" of a practice (Bell, 1992: 211) that contributes to giving a performance the aura of tradition. Through this process, new values are incorporated and legitimated. It is an effective strategy to impose a particular interpretation of events and although rituals are often seen as slowing down change, they can also be used to manage change. "Each ritual event is a patterned activity to be sure, but it is also invented anew as it happens. (...) The authenticity of the event [is] inscribed in its performance, not in some time and custom sanctioned version of the ritual" (Dirks, 1992: 237). Moreover, meanings change with repetition either through forgetting or elaboration – one forgets wider associations and develops new ones – or because the event has an effect upon networks of meaning and thus changes the system to which it belongs (Goody, 1977). Paradoxically, its very conservatism makes ritual a potent force for political change.

Written rules and interviews with party officials and politicians[9] only unveil what the party is prepared to say about itself. Party elites rarely spontaneously acknowledge the strategic uses of rules. To really understand how parties work, one also needs to look at the practices through which values are constructed and shared by party members. Since 1993, I have observed the various changes undergone by British party conferences in terms of organisation, stage-management and policy-making. Despite their denigration of rituals, party officials actively work on ritualisation – the "invention of tradition"[10] to legitimate new practices and ideologies. Over the years, the "masters of rituals" have strategically adapted the symbols used and changed the official interpretation that can be drawn from such performances. The combination of various methods ranging from observation and interviews on the one hand and work on original documents and secondary sources on the other is necessary to analyse the rules, rituals and routines[11] which define, within a party, what can be done and who the legitimate actors are. These methods not only trace the changes but they also highlight actors' interpretations of their practices.

Ironically, given Kertzer's point that rituals "naturalise" certain practices, labelling an action a "ritual" in our modern secularised setting has the

reverse effect of denaturalising it.[12] This is because to call a performance a ritual today is to highlight the culturally constructed nature of the action and to associate it with pre-modern modes of behaviour. It also annihilates some of its "magical" effect on participants and viewers. Such a move also denies such actions legitimacy because it calls into questions their instrumentality or effectiveness. Hence, using the word "ritual" in a modern context to describe an action already predisposes one to see it as an artificial attempt to confer legitimacy and produce social cohesion. This partly explains the reaction of party officials to questions about the importance of opening and closing ceremonies or merit awards. They describe conference rituals as "quaint practices" indulged in "to please the activists" (see Chapter 3). It is indeed difficult to admit publicly in contemporary Britain where everything has to be "modernised", the survival of practices that appear "non-rational". On the other hand, Francois Mitterrand ironically described the Congress of the Socialist Party as *la Pâque des socialistes, chaque fois ils rescucitent* (the Socialists' Easter, each time they resurrect). Applied to a party attached to the secular ideal of *laïcité* to the point of being occasionally anti-religious,[13] such a comparison is above all mischievous. This candour about rituals, however, is the exception rather than the norm in France but it draws attention to the importance of ritual practices for even the most "secular" party organisation.[14] If one follows the work of Mary Douglas, it comes as no surprise that the acknowledgement of the prominence of rituals in politics is made by a politician trained by Jesuits. However, in sharp contrast, the wholesale denigration of ritual by British party elites itself reflects a Protestant culture immersed in a vigorous anti-ritualist tradition (Douglas, 1976: 61). It also reflects the dominant "modernist" and "reformist" spirit that has dominated British political life since the 1980s. Douglas argues that man is a "ritual animal" and "social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them (...) it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts" (Douglas, 1976: 62). As she points out, historically and culturally, the denigration of rituals in a British context is linked to Protestant attempts to denigrate Catholic rituals. Interestingly, the politics of labelling and the negative connotations associated with "ritual" also convince party organisers to place them at less prominent moments in the timetable.

Modernist sensibilities not withstanding, I agree with scholars such as Douglas and Kertzer in arguing that rituals retain an important role in contemporary political life. Rituals indeed are crucial in modern liberal democracies, as in all other societies, precisely because they confer (and sometimes even challenge) legitimacy. Political life without rituals is a politics divested of its social legitimacy.

The conference season

Party conferences corresponded to a particular phase in British politics: they formed an integral part of the political cycle based on parliamentary domination where parties were paramount. The centre of gravity of British politics in the 1990s however has shifted away from Parliament and parties as policy networks have become more dense and complex. The gladiatorial face-to-face sparring between the Government and Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition (be it at Prime Minister's Question Time or indirectly through conference debates) is seen as too conflictual. As Janet Newman points out "governance has become the defining narrative of British government at the start of the new century" (2001: 11). This challenges the notion of Britain as a unitary state with a strong executive and emphasises the role of local, regional and national political elites in forging coalitions with private businesses, voluntary associations and other agents in order to mobilise resources and enhance the chances of orienting policies towards negotiated goals.[15]

Because they refer to symbols and practices that are no longer seen as predominant in contemporary British political life, conferences are generally dismissed as vestigial. Moreover, their declining reputation today is partly linked to the banalisation of political images caused partly by over-exposure in the media-saturated 1990s and the adoption of marketing techniques. The professionalisation of their production has bred scepticism regarding their spontaneity and thus their authenticity. Audiences are not only *blasé* but increasingly more sophisticated in their judgements, whether this is linked to rising levels of education, cognitive mobilisation or greater political awareness (Inglehart, 1990). TV audiences are less loyal[16] and more likely to switch channels at the mention of politics, especially when politics seems to be reduced to rival teams of managers for public resources (Pattie *et al.*, 2004).

"Politics is no longer associated with a remote figure of power" but has become personalised (Balandier, 1992: 111) with political personnel being given a "celebrity" dimension. Images and sound bites create heroic figures capable of capturing the imagination. Since the 1970s, a "democracy of the public" has replaced party democracy (Manin, 1996: 279) and personalities have surpassed party affiliation and programmes as a crucial aspect of electoral presentation. Communication technologies play a role all the more important as there is no independent demand on the electoral market (Schumpeter, 1942). Politicians articulate their offer in a competitive and unpredictable environment. The outcome is an executive/electorate relationship that is both more direct and more

dependent upon images. Politicians now engage in direct political debate with the electorate, increasingly bypassing Parliament. Whilst the press, a "cold" medium, favours ideologies and battles of ideas, and radio privileges orators and speeches, television thrives on images rather than oratory skills. These images are all the more potent because they convey a sense of immediacy and transparency (Balandier, 1992: 117–118) which obscures the process of mediation taking place (see Chapter 6).

Compared to other European countries,[17] Britain has a long and venerable tradition of parliamentary politics so much so that in 1991 about three-fifths of Britons associated government with parties and Parliament (Merelman, 1991: 23). With over 100 years of precedent, conferences are an integral element of British democracy: for a month every year, the main political organisations hold their national gatherings by the seaside. Thanks to the considerable attention that they receive, conferences act as reminders of the existence of political parties, whilst at the same time, taking them temporarily outside of Westminster. They are an opportunity for parties to address the electorate outside an electoral campaign[18] and for politicians to be seen meeting "real people". The conference city, be it Brighton, Blackpool or Bournemouth, becomes for a few days a microcosm of the nation and a symbol of the "accessibility" and representative function of politicians in a democracy. Photo opportunities are organised for instance at local schools or at the racetrack. Thus, politicians are presented as "in touch" with the common citizen, mixing with "ordinary" people.

The "conference season"[19] marks the end of the summer recess and the beginning of the new parliamentary year. It draws attention to the inner workings of political parties and also restores the political structure after the interruptions of the "silly season".[20] It is a calendar ritual[21] that is inextricably linked in its timing and significance to the new session of Parliament with its wigs and robes, the MPs' procession led by Black Rod to the House of Lords and the Queen's speech.[22] Party conferences create a double sense of community as they clearly demarcate partisan groups from each other and also place party opposition within the larger framework of national institutions.[23] By taking part in this national ritual, parties reaffirm the supremacy of Parliament in the polity,[24] and acknowledge a certain "pecking order". In the age of television (and now webcams), voters can watch their gladiators perform from home or in the office. The leader's conference speech provides an occasion to demonstrate his/her might and charisma. The conference season actualises the political map, frames ideological debates and clarifies the positions of the competing teams. It legitimises

political organisations and the ways in which social and political conflicts are mediated, displaced or relocated in Westminster. It offers a stage for a public but pacific expression of competing ideologies. It reminds citizens of what constitutes a "proper" way to behave in politics. It celebrates political commitment and political activity. For parties it is an annual rite of renewal. In its ritualised conferment of legitimacy on political elites, it highlights the sacred dimension of politics.[25]

Following the anthropologist Victor Turner (1989a), it is illuminating to analyse the conference season as a liminal period or a threshold between ordinary life and the beginning of parliamentary season. Power (like the Polynesian *manu*) at this time appears strangely close thanks to Cabinet ministers, their Shadows and parliamentarians, whose presence gives the event an extraordinary and intensified dimension. Indeed, for a long time, Conservative politicians were only guests at the National Union Conference. Politicians were, however, the main attraction and the culmination of the week was of course the leader's speech. The parties have always been aware of this attraction and now actively promote the presence of the great and the powerful, as an incentive for members (and the media) to attend the conference. Moreover, traditional hierarchies are somehow blurred for the participants who are able to mix with the political elite of the country and are in a position to ask questions, and even challenge them on occasion. Party conferences are usually held in coastal towns, as if to symbolise the farthest reaches of the nation on the edge of the political mainland. To stretch the analogy, one can see here an attempt to demonstrate how politics reaches out to the electorate beyond the confines of Westminster.[26] Furthermore the seaside context enhances the out-of-time, out-of-place character of conferences[27] and has also added a Bacchanalian and festive spirit to such occasions (see Chapter 3). These resorts not only offer accommodation facilities but they are also relatively attractive for a week's holiday[28] – though increasingly less so now. In the 1990s, the three main parties decided to get together to exert effective pressure on conference centres and service providers, such as telecom companies who wire up the facilities for the party and the media. "We share experiences", explain organisers for the three main parties. Not only does a representative of the other parties always attend conferences but organisers also use the opportunity to explore the facilities to be provided for the following year. The presence of such observers, often seen as outrageous by the rank-and-file, also allows parties to copy each other in terms of session format or stage management.

Party cultures

Angelo Panebianco (1988) has offered one of the most interesting models for the study of parties, taking into account the influence of their origins on future developments. We can thus contrast parties according to their genetic (parliamentary or civil society) types.

Parties originating within Parliament have tended to become cadre-parties, then electoral-professional parties. They place democratic legitimacy in their parliamentarians, anointed by universal suffrage. Cadre-parties appeared in Britain in the 1830s[29] when parliamentarians created external organisations because successive reforms of the electoral system made it crucial for sitting MPs to gather the support of newly registered voters.[30] The Liberals and the Conservatives developed into elite-centred parties (Wolinetz, 2002: 143), with the leadership holding tight rein over policy-making and strategy.[31] The Liberals created the precursor of a political party in Birmingham in the late 19th century (Ostrogorski, 1979), and the Conservatives soon followed this example. But these remained isolated groups until the foundation of the National Union of Conservative Associations (NU) in 1867. The extra-parliamentary wing of the Liberal party was founded ten years later. In this context, the party conference served primarily as a means to mobilise supporters. In both the Liberal and the Conservative cases, the role of the membership in political decision-making was no more than an afterthought. In fact, the political and voluntary organisations were kept separate. The parliamentary party retained considerable autonomy in formulating policies with little or no influence from the membership. The Liberal Democrats were founded in the context of a much smaller and weaker parliamentary representation and therefore have tended to treat their members with greater consideration.[32]

Parties emanating from civil society consider that the source of their legitimacy rests within the party itself, that is its members (Seiler, 2003: 316). Members are essential resources for mass parties because they provide free labour, in particular at election time. They also bring funds through fees and donations. Compared to the previous generation of parties, these organisations shifted power from parliamentary office to the party on the ground.[33] They granted their grassroots more influence over leadership and policies, mainly through the election of a congress of delegates. The objective was to prevent the emergence of an oligarchy removed from the preoccupations of the movement (Michels, 1962). The Labour party is the archetypal example of such an organisation. It was founded at a 1900 conference of trade unions and socialist societies

to promote working-class representation and interests. The constitution sought to ensure that the annual conference remained the sovereign decision-making body where policies were debated and adopted, officials elected and held accountable. More than 70 years later and in a very different political context, the Green Party also emerged from civil society and espoused a similar model of organisation.[34] If the democratic nature of internal procedures were not at first an absolute priority, the Green Party adopted the "new politics" agenda and form of organisation in the 1980s (Faucher, 1999a; Kitschelt, 1990). They have developed structures devoted to participative democracy, creating numerous obstacles to the emergence of anything more than a purely functional leadership.

A second dimension, proximity to state power, is important to understand the evolution of British parties. For most of its history, the Westminster model has been characterised by a two-party system, largely enforced thanks to the "first-past-the-post" electoral system. Indeed, plurality severely restricts access to Parliament – and to a lesser degree to local government. It creates a majoritarian bias for the allocation of seats that strongly disadvantages smaller organisations (Faucher, 2000) and means that only two parties can seriously consider governmental office. Another consequence is the predominance of single-party government. In the 1920s, the struggle between the Liberal and the Labour party ended with the latter becoming the second main player alongside the Conservatives. The situation remained unchanged until the 1970s, when centre politics regained some visibility. Fourteen Liberal MPs were elected in 1974. New parties were created such as the Greens but also the short-lived Social Democratic Party (SDP). Heir to the Liberals and the SDP, the Liberal Democrats have expanded their parliamentary representation to 46 in 1997, 52 in 2001 and 62 MPs in 2005. On the other hand, the Greens claim one Lord but have yet to send their first MP to Westminster.[35] This dimension, which encompasses both the probability of exercising governmental responsibilities but also the desire to attain such a goal, has important consequences on parties. It affects attitudes to (and practice of) the internal organisation. Removed from power with hardly any chance of attaining it under the current system, the Greens have focused their attention on policies and participative democracy at the expense of electoral efficacy. One can argue that their limited resources and their radicalism have contributed to maintaining their marginal status (Faucher, 1999a) but it is more important here to highlight how executive power has been a factor influencing the evolution of party organisations regarding the role

attributed to members in policy-making or leadership accountability. The position of parties relative to government evolves and so do their organisation and practice of politics.

Conferences were first "invented" when parliamentarians were trying to organise their supporters at the time of enfranchisement. The first Tory conference was held in 1867. In the following years, the event only attracted a handful of participants (7 including the officers at the second conference in Birmingham and 36 in 1869) until the National Union decided to mark the occasion with a banquet in 1872 at which Disraeli gave a speech (Bulmer-Thomas, 1965: 112). The foundation of the Labour party in 1900 transformed the symbolism and the role of the annual conference. Because it allowed representatives from the membership to deliberate policies and decisions,[36] it linked the event to the question of intra-party democracy.

British political parties' annual gatherings were originally semi-private affairs. These national gatherings play different roles in each organisation but they share a number of functions, from developing policy options and legitimising policy choices, to publicising party activities, building party cohesion, social integration and sharing campaigning experiences. These functions vary according to party culture but have also changed under the influence of the wider cultural, institutional and political environment. Today, the model for party democracy is not the conference of delegates but deliberative democracy through a multiplication of open forums (Chapter 8) or direct democracy through the ballots (Chapter 9). Maurice Duverger (1964) was optimistic when he announced that the mass party model would contaminate other parties. Nevertheless, they have often been the implicit reference for those looking at party organisations. Through the recent "emphasis upon 'democratisation', modernisers within [the Labour and the Conservative] parties have achieved a degree of organisational symmetry in their respective parties unthinkable less than a decade before" (Judge, 1999: 95). As a consequence, party conferences offer an interesting prism through which changes in British political parties can be compared.[37]

The Conservatives

The Conservative conference has always been conceived as a rally of the faithful, an opportunity for volunteers to meet up with like-minded individuals from around the country in order to socialise and exchange experiences and ideas. The meeting was organised by the NU, a body legally autonomous from both the professional (Central Office) and the political (the Conservative Parliamentary group) "wings" of a "notional"

Conservative Party. In the early days, most MPs did not bother to attend: the gathering had no power and their presence was almost a superfluous expense. The first political debate was held in 1876 and the question of members' influence remained meaningless until the adoption of a unitary constitution in 1998.

Conservatives believe in democracy by consent, in which voters are given a power to control rather than initiate (Beer, 1982: 96). It is a "government of the people, for the people but not by them".[38] Voters can choose between alternative teams but the government, once in office, have a right to govern and should not be bound by a mandate. Between elections, voters are expected to be passive. In the classic Tory approach, the role of the party is to help the diffusion of Conservative values and ideals through the country and not the production of party policies. It is a model based on deference and trust in the elite's legitimacy to lead. Such an understanding of society is mirrored in the party organisation: members have a limited role, the leadership is free to adapt its policies according to what it perceives is the best option for the party and the country. From the end of the 19th century to the Thatcher period, the primary objective of the Conservative party has been the conquest and retention of power.[39] Efficiency in electoral competition implied a quick decision-making process, focused around the personality of the leader and grounded in a culture of deference and a belief in the right of elites to govern. Helped by an indeterminate number of unaccountable committees that he was able to consult without having to follow their advice, the Conservative leader enjoyed great autonomy. His power was thus only hindered by the necessity to preserve the support of his followers. In many ways, his supremacy became unchallenged from the day of his nomination so long as he remained successful. The Conservative leader appoints all senior officials and representatives as well as the *Front Bench* team (McKenzie, 1964: 55–56). He determines policy orientations (Beer, 1982: 246; McKenzie, 1964: 62–65). Networks, committees and informal rules limit the autonomy of the leader since he still has to abide by accepted norms of conduct and therefore to know the party and its hierarchs (Norton and Aughey, 1981: 258–259).

The Labour party

The originality of the Labour Party has lain in the centrality of conference. The Labour movement followed a model of delegatory democracy in which the annual conference acted as the sovereign body of the organisation. The various components of this indirect organisation sent

delegates to the yearly meeting. Each constituent kept its identity and autonomy but most visibly contributed to the collective endeavour at conference. Here was the place where policies and strategies were debated and adopted, where executive officers were elected and their actions monitored. With the 1906 constitution, the parliamentary party was called to present a report on its efforts to implement the instructions of the conference. The "parliamentary party report" contributed to focusing attention on conference as the moment of accountability for the party leadership.

The exhaustive research conducted by Minkin (1980) has shown how the conference played a crucial role in the complex organisation of the Labour party and in particular in the subtle interplay of powers between the constituent members (trade unions, socialist societies and constituency parties) as well as between various committees and groups (the National Executive and its sub-committees, the parliamentary party and various other groups acting as liaison between others). Often backed by the big unions, the National Executive Committee (NEC) long dominated proceedings. However, the balance of power began to shift in the 1980s as the leadership proceeded to "modernise" the party. Beyond the Policy Review (Shaw, 1994; Taylor, 1997), the organisation itself was reformed. Power was centralised with the leadership establishing a firmer control over the party and over the organisation of the sovereign conference. However, the most important transformations were introduced only after the Labour party returned to power in 1997.

The Labour Co-ordinating Committee produced a report in 1996 that clearly showed the direction of future changes, giving the blueprint of a "Project" to modernise the organisation of the Labour party. Not only did the document set the tone of the reforms but also suggested a step-by-step transformation of ways of working that would turn the still chaotic, committee-driven party, dominated by unions and activists, into an efficient massive organisation. Under Blair's leadership, Labour has become modelled on private business and treats its members as stakeholders. For a party that began its life as an organisation of socialist, trade unionists and working-class activists, this has been a remarkable transformation, and one that would have been unthinkable without Margaret Thatcher's "revolution" in British politics in the 1980s.

The Liberal Democrats

The National Liberal Federation was founded at a conference in 1877 attended by delegates from 95 local associations. Chamberlain was elected President (Cook, 2002: 14) but it took about ten years for the

Federation to grow in influence and move its base to London. Behind a façade of representation, the Liberal Federation had a centralised organisation that made the Conservatives' National Union look amateurish.[40] Although the Liberal party was created by politicians and exercised governmental power in turns until the 1930s, its conferences played a more important role than is the case for the Conservatives.[41] Disappointments on the electoral scene contributed to make the conference an important occasion to boost the morale of supporters. In 1970, the Party Assembly attracted 900 delegates to Brighton, 600 fewer than 4 years before. Turmoil in the two-party system in the 1970–80s revived the organisation.

Today's party is the product of the merger between the Liberals and the SDP, a secession from Labour founded in 1981[42] that had demonstrated an early awareness of the importance of communication. To attract media attention, the SDP organised its first conference on a train going from Perth to Bradford and London. The "rolling conference" saved expensive and long journeys whilst those who chose to travel on board the conference train enjoyed the conviviality, the singing and the drinking. It also made for "good television, far better than the usual pictures of bored-looking delegates in seaside conference halls": journalists liked the innovation. "The symbolism of the whole occasion worked: the chartered train and the new party were both on the move" (Crewe and King, 1995: 141). The novelty soon faded out: in 1982, the train broke down and the journalists were bored (Crewe and King, 1995: 162). As the party failed to live up to its ambition, it looked into strategic partnerships.

Ideological proximity and electoral self-interest led to the constitution of an Alliance between the old Liberal party and the SDP. Despite coming less than one point behind Labour in the 1983 general election, the new British political centre only won 23 MPs.[43] The Liberal/SDP merger first happened on the ground as several constituency associations joined forces in 1987 (Cook, 2002: 188) but the proposal encountered considerable resistance. David Owen's supporters within the SDP considered that the Liberals were both "weak and unreliable" on many issues. Nevertheless, a few months (and several conferences) later, the merger was ratified in 1989.

The Social and Liberal Democrats tried to reconcile in their structure the centralised, hierarchical tendencies of the SDP with the decentralised, pluralistic thrust of the Liberals. The first two years were tough: their finances were in trouble, the membership stagnant and they came fourth, behind the Greens, in the 1989 European elections. In 1990, the

Blackpool conference adopted a less complicated name, clarified its policies, and chose an emblem. Conferences have provided the Liberal Democrats with opportunities to construct a distinctive identity in a political system that has difficulties conceiving of the possibility of an alternative to a strictly dichotomous opposition. Liberal Democrats contrast what they claim are democratic procedures that give members a real say on policy-making to what happens in the Labour and Conservative parties. They are suspicious of the idea of discipline and mandates and praise their ability to address in conferences controversial issues that are carefully avoided by the bigger parties. Although conferences' decisions become party policy, the Liberal Democrat electoral manifesto has often left out some of the most controversial and radical policies.

The Green Party

Analysis of British party political life is often limited to the two main organisations or extended to include a third national party, the Liberal Democrats. Such focus on parliamentary parties becomes increasingly problematic when we consider the growing importance of extra-parliamentary politics. Although the electoral system has successfully kept potential competitors at bay, small parties have relentlessly attempted to enter the field, demonstrating the strength of political mobilisation outside the traditional borders of conventional Westminster politics. Despite the odds, the oldest European Green Party has consistently presented candidates at general elections in order to force mainstream parties to pay attention to its ecological agenda. Conferences focus the attention of outside observers and it is difficult to imagine today a British political party without an annual conference. To be sure, the first decision of a new organisation is to hold an annual gathering with the hope that it will place them on the political map.[44] The Greens have held regular meetings since 1974. In 1977, the conference adopted a constitution. The following year, the party approved an electoral strategy, breaking away from the tradition of environmental associations. The party has voluntarily maintained a relatively weak structure, limiting the role of the national organisation to the co-ordination of initiatives from below. The conference has thus been the only place where a common organisational culture could develop. Moreover, delegates concentrate decision-making powers: they elect members of national committees, control the work of the party executive, adopt policies and debate strategy options. An inclusive conference is the corner stone to the participative democracy that the Greens aspire to

because it creates the conditions of a face-to-face and responsible community. The Greens argue that, unlike in mainstream parties, all motions adopted at conference become party policy and are included in the *Manifesto for a Sustainable Society* (MfSS). Their claims to be "truly" democratic are largely ignored by parliamentary parties because they can be dismissed as an "irrelevant" electoral threat. Although recent successes under proportional representation confirm the role played by "first-past-the-post" in excluding them from national political visibility, their practices have contributed to limit the effectiveness of their organisation in a political environment increasingly dominated by the media and by the personalisation of politics.

"Modernising" political parties?

During the years I have followed them (1994–2003), British parties grew obsessed with change, partly because of the successes of New Labour. Not only have its opponents endeavoured to emulate its example and, as a consequence, adopted some of its rhetoric and innovations but the New Labour government has also contributed to the transformation of the institutional, legal, cultural and political environment in which all parties evolve.

In his first conference speech as Labour leader, Tony Blair declared that "parties that do not change die, and this party is a living movement, not a historical monument". Since 1994, Blair has relentlessly pushed Labour into a new kind of permanent revolution guided by a quasi-evangelical vision of change for its own sake.[45] Labour has made "modernisation"[46] its *motto*: it was marketed as "new" and artificially contrasted with "old" Labour. "Old Labour" became a scapegoat charged with all the evils (incompetence, division, bureaucracy, lack of democracy) from which the party wished to distance itself. Self-labelled modernisers considered that a reform of the organisation was an electoral necessity, if only to convince voters that the party had reformed and was indeed different from its earlier unelectable incarnation. Because it merges teleological undertones,[47] the idea of ineluctable progress and positive connotations of technological developments, modernisation is a powerful rhetorical tool. It is marvellously ambiguous. Tony Blair has many times expressed a vision of change that combines fatalism and voluntarism and denies any other alternative:

> The issue is: do we shape [change] or does it shape us? Do we master it, or do we let it overwhelm us? That's the sole key to politics in the

> modern world: how to manage change. Resist it: futile; let it happen: dangerous. So – the third way – manage it.[48]

There are many ways in which parties can change: policies are redrafted and strategies are adapted.[49] New leaders play a determining role (Wilson, 1994) because they establish their authority thanks to symbolic and practical decisions that strengthen the position of their teams or of their ideas. Both Tony Blair and William Hague marked the beginning of their leadership with symbolic and organisational reforms (respectively in 1994 and 1997), with variable success. Beyond the evolution of rules, practices are adapted. The culture of the organisation is also ultimately affected. Change cannot be imposed from above and is always met with some resistance because organisations are Conservative and actors strategic (Crozier and Friedberg, 1981). The conversion of the Conservative party to a unitary organisation with formal procedures for the consultation of members in 1998 was too abrupt to affect practices and the disappointing consequences of the 2001 leadership election contributed to entrench established modes of conduct. In 1992, the new Green Party constitution was the result of a coup. The disputes that ensued led to resignations, to a secession and, ultimately, to the progressive repealing of the most contentious clauses. To avoid failure, it is thus necessary to "convince" members to embrace new rules or practices. A slow, step-by-step process often avoids upfront conflicts and is most effective when the reform is preceded by a phase of "consultation". This can even be conducted by party elites to lead to the desired conclusion. Tom Sawyer, the former Labour General Secretary, candidly explains how new policy-making procedures were presented as "dictated by circumstances", experimented on and then institutionalised. "When it's done, it's done, nobody thinks about it."[50] The Conservatives followed the same approach in 2000 – with far less "consultation", admitted in substance by Chris Poole.

These structural reforms also had symbolic implications. In the case of Labour, much more than the Conservatives, they have contributed to changing the image of the party for members and voters. "Conference is not only the place where politics takes place symbolically, as necessary celebration, ritual renewal and so on, but is often the site of political change itself" (Gaffney, 1991: 13). Political initiatives are announced; symbolic events leave a mark on the party's identity as demonstrated by Kinnock's attack on the Militant Tendency in 1985 or the re-branding of the Labour party in 1995. Conference actualises changes in party structure and symbols, whether new procedures need

to be endorsed or because it is a decisive nexus for the diffusion of new ideas, interpretations and practices. Moreover, the omnipresence of the media means that they have become a crucial element in any public relations strategy because the image projected affects not only members' perceptions but also those of the wider public, including opponents and journalists. Change of image, however, is not enough if it does not appear consistent with the "reality" of the party. New Labour's modernisers were convinced that the culture of the party had to change because, like a business, the members (staff) who promote (sell) the organisation and its policies (products) have to share the values of the company to be properly convincing as "ambassadors in the community". Conferences, then, are windows through which the outside observer can follow the processes of change.

Structure of the book

In this book, I attempt to trace how British annual party conferences have changed at the turn of the Millennium and what it tells us about change in party organisations and symbolic practices. Conferences are probably the best place to observe the evolutions of the relationships between the grassroots and the elites and the transformation of each party's modes of interaction. In Chapter 2, I explore individual motivations to attend conference and show that although approaches that focus upon instrumental rationality are helpful, they are insufficient in explaining why participants invest so much in these apparently archaic and "quaint" events. I suggest instead that we take into account other approaches to activism and consider participation in terms of expressive, rather than outcome-oriented action. In this light, we can understand conference attendance as an affirmation of group-identity. In Chapter 3, I go on to analyse ways in which the conference has a central role to play in the construction of party identity, applying the insights of "new social movement" approaches to mainstream organisations. Not only does the annual conference contribute to the "imagined community" of each party, it also structures and frames what members do and what they think they have in common. This is explored in terms of each party's specific group styles. These styles emerge progressively over time and thereby provide an element of stability to political parties. At the same time, a group's styles evolve, reflecting changes as well as acting upon them. Chapter 4 focuses on the legitimisation of leadership and the construction of hierarchies through the ritualisation of a number of conference practices. Party organisers endeavour to give the leader's

speech a particular atmosphere of enthusiasm and solemnity that creates the impression of charisma, with the hope of turning the show into an event of national importance that justifies media attention. The most important environmental factor for the transformation of politics in the late 20th century has been the expansion of electronic media and competition between media outlets. In Britain, political parties and the media have developed complex relationships, characterised by mutual accusations and mistrust as well as interdependency. In Chapter 5, the preparation of conference is examined. Over recent years, party leaderships have asserted tighter control over the conference agenda and timetable in order to ensure the promotion of favourable issues and coverage. This development has only been possible because grassroots' input on the intra-party political agenda has been further limited whilst the conference preparatory phase has lost some of its integrative function. In order to better control both party image and news agenda, party elites have perfected the stage management of conference. Media attention and each political party's increased concerns about its public image have also had an impact on the role party members are accorded in policy-making. It is therefore important to examine the elaboration of the conference agenda and the directing of conference debates. Chapter 6 discusses the impact of news media on recent transformations of conferences, looking at the influence their inquisitive and critical presence has had upon the management of conferences by party elites. The means invented by parties to maintain control over their image are contrasted with journalists' efforts to avoid being instrumentalised by partisan propaganda.

In Chapter 7, I consider plenary session debates not in terms of the content of policy formation but as performances and highlight how the presence of the media has contributed to self-discipline amongst delegates and representatives in a collective attempt to produce a desired impression of professionalism and competence. Whilst conferences seem to be increasingly dominated by the objectives of party leaderships, thereby challenging the idea that conferences are the primary locus of intra-party democracy, democratic procedures are taken for granted within western liberal regimes and there has been a growing academic and public debate about the nature of representative government. Societal demands for greater democratic participation and governmental responsiveness have coincided with a spiral of demobilisation that has particularly affected mainstream political parties. One of their responses to a perceived challenge to their legitimacy has been the introduction of organisational reforms that emphasise

deliberative democracy as a means to reconnect politicians with the grassroots. Chapter 8 analyses how the multiplication of small-group discussions affects the patterns of vertical communication within parties and critically examines the claim that conference seminars and policy forums make party leaderships more responsive to their members' preoccupations. The challenge for parties is to convince their members that promises of wider consultation are matched with genuine influence upon party orientations. Conference votes have been potent symbols of intra-party democracy. They seem to confer decision-making powers to delegates and representatives. They also contribute to the legitimisation of the organisation through a symbolic acceptance of societal norms.

Chapter 9 examines the evolutions of voting practices and the consequences on party boundaries and identities of another set of organisational reforms introduced at the same time. Following a movement that simultaneously happened in continental Europe, British political parties have adopted procedures inspired by an individualist model of democracy. All have granted their members new individual rights to vote for the selection of candidates, leaders and internal officers. Members have been balloted on draft manifestos and party organisation and supporters are also increasingly consulted. What are the implications of the introduction of "direct democracy" procedures on activism since it is clear that party leaderships have also intended to use such reforms to bypass activists? Finally, Chapter 10 explores the significance of the exponential growth of the political and commercial conference fringe. Similar to what has happened at the Edinburgh Festival, the fringe has become an event in itself, almost overtaking the official scene. This development reflects not only a reaction against increasing restrictions imposed upon debates in the main hall by public relations considerations but also a fundamental transformation of the relationship between political parties and civil society. It highlights in particular a shift away from traditional Westminster-centred politics to a multi-levelled model of governance (Wilson, 2004: 10–11). Moreover, the opaque interaction between business interests and politics raises the important question of funding for political parties.

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