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UK Political Parties

Produced by Dr Peter Jepson

Read and précis notes - Chapter 4 (pages 93-106) of 'The Essentials of UK Politics' (or equivalent) - will be checked prior to the delivery of this lecture.

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Academic discipline

- Raise your hand if you have a question.
- Turn off your mobile.
- Annotate your notes.

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UK Political Parties

Below are some examples of UK Political Parties - can you add any others?

- BNP, NF, SNP. Plaid Cymru.
- Labour Party, Liberal Party (not the same as Lib Dems), Conservative Party.
- Green Party, Respect.

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A basic question ...

- Could a representative democracy survive without political parties?

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Role of political parties

Political parties have the following roles:

- **Representation** - *in a liberal democracy they represent interests and opinions of a section of the electorate.*
- **Recruitment of Leaders**

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Role of political parties

- **Government** - help to ensure stable government.
- **Policy formulation**
- **Participation and mobilisation** - while not necessary with representative government the grass roots of the major political parties helps cement democracy and important agents of political education in the UK.

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Two main approaches to analysing political parties

- **The elitist model** - *Robert Michels*
- **The pluralist model** -

When you tackle examination questions - write any relevant essays, and/or give analysis of UK Political Parties - you should seek to reflect these models in your answer. However, you should also reflect the fact that life is not always so rigid or systematic - compromise is often evident. **Remember:** the marks are in the discussion - try to give a balanced argument.

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Elitist Model basics

- **The elitist model** - the German sociologist *Robert Michels* argues political leaders have a vested interest in imposing unity on their followers. He argues that oligarchy - the rule of the few - is an inescapable feature of all large organisations.

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Elitist Model what can be expected

- Parliamentary candidates chosen by the leadership
- Most parliamentary candidates have similar backgrounds and characteristics
- Party Leader chosen by a small select group
- Powerful Party Leader

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Elitist Model what can be expected

- Party conference no more than a rally to show support for the leadership
 - Policy is decided by the leadership.
- Question** - Do the media expect to find an elitist model within a Political Party and therefore promote such an expectation?

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Pluralist model arguments

- Many pluralists believe *Michel's* elitist model is too pessimistic and argue that political parties provide opportunities for everyone to strive for office.
- They also argue that Party Leaders have to listen carefully to the views of their grass root members.

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Pluralist model arguments

Broadly speaking pluralists argue

- Parliamentary candidates are chosen by the constituency membership.
- Candidates reflect a wide range of backgrounds and characteristics.
- Party Leader chosen by the whole membership.

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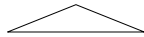
Pluralist model arguments

- The Party Leader has limited powers - s/he is not all powerful.
- The Party Conference is an open forum for debate.
- Policy is decided by the whole membership or by a large representative group.

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Ideology and party organisation

- Traditional Conservative ideology:
 - *Hierarchy*
 - *Discipline*
 - *Enlightened elite*
- Traditional Labour ideology:
 - *Equality*
 - *Co-operation*
 - *'Grassroots' democracy*



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Small group work

Imagine the rest of the class are your party members. Sticking to either traditional Conservative or Labour ideas, draw up a procedure for:

1. Selecting leaders.
2. Formulating policies.
3. Dealing with dissenters.

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Party leadership

- Using cartoon handout on leadership style and other knowledge you have reflect individually and then in pairs on the question:
 - *What makes a party leader dominant?*
- Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

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Who has the power?

- Obviously the power in any organisation will be individual and vary from time to time. However, it is possible to assess the key actors in political parties.

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Party Power

- **Party leaders:** McKenzie argued that for practical purposes the power of the two main parties lies in their leadership. Conference?
- **Parliamentary Parties:** The 'back benchers' (PLP and 1922 Committee) have played important roles in recent decades. Examples?

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Party Power

- **Constituency members:** Recent party developments (Hague reforms) have taken policy formation away from the membership. But members help select candidates.
- **Party backers:** These are the people that fund the party - unions & businesses for Labour, alternative business for Conservatives. Do they hold the real power?

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Party funding ...

- **Declining party membership** - Conservatives and Labour have declined to around 250,000 and 166,000 respectively. - with Liberal Democrats at 60,000.

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How should parties be funded?

- By party membership donations? What is the problem with this?
- By Trade Union and/or Company funding? What is the problem with this?
- By State funding?

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Break into small political groups ...

Discuss and report back on:

1. How political parties should be funded.
2. If there is a need for control over funding.
3. How party funding is and should be controlled.

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A quick note on Ideology

- Recent commentators have suggested that there is little or no ideological difference between major parties.
- Cons = New Right, conservatism & one nation
- Lab = third way, democratic socialism and liberalism.

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Labour's move to the right

- Clause IV
- 'Big tent' politics
- Targeted benefits (as opposed to universal)

- But what about the return of nationalisation?

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Conservative move to the centre?

- Green politics
- Social liberalism and public spending (but with tax cuts)
- The 'Big Society'

- 'There is such a thing as society, it just isn't the same thing as the state.'

» Cameron

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