



Strangled by the Duopoly

The collapse of UK Democracy, 1975-2012 and some proposals for its revival.

A Green House report on party-funding.

John Hare
Rupert Read

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Green House Post-Growth Project

Everyone agrees that we are in the midst of a massive financial and economic crisis. We have suffered the biggest ‘crash’ since the 30s, and it may get far bigger yet. How ought this ongoing crisis to be understood, and resolved?

On the mainstream view: We have vast government deficits, and stagnant economies. We have a dire need for economic growth – and a deep-set need for austerity, bringing with it massive cuts in public services.

But what if that diagnosis, which reflects mainstream wisdom, is all wrong? What if the crisis that we are currently experiencing is one which casts into doubt the entire edifice of capitalist economics, which sets growth as the primary objective of all policy? What if the fight between those who say that without austerity first there can be no growth and those who say that we must invest and borrow more now in order to resume growth is a false dichotomy - because both sides are assuming ‘growthism’ as an unquestioned dogma?

The aim of the Green House Post-Growth project is to challenge the common-sense that assumes that it is ‘bad news’ when the economy doesn’t grow and to anatomise what it is about the structure of our economic system that means growth must always be prioritised. We need to set out an attractive, attainable vision of what one country would look like, once we deliberately gave up growth-mania – and of how to get there. And we need to find ways of communicating this to people that make sense, and that motivate change.



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Summary

A long and seemingly escalating series of scandals of sleaze are one palpable sign of a crisis surrounding the way that political parties in this country are funded. But this report argues that any discussion of party funding that does not examine the wider crisis of UK democracy – including questions of electoral system, participation-rates and corporate power -- is an exercise in deckchair rearrangement. For this reason, this report goes beyond the narrow ‘traditional’ domain of party-funding to consider the funding question in the context of the broader crisis.

We argue here that there is nothing contradictory about the public being opposed to both large donations *and* opposing increased state funding; to see a contradiction is to assume that the public want to see more of the same in their politics. But they do not: they have been voting with their hands and with their feet, for a long time now, against acquiescence in two-party ‘business-as-usual’ politics.

The public are being utterly consistent in seeking to end the corrupt culture of the big donors *and* to refuse to give further money to the governing parties that have ceased to represent anything more than a small minority of the population, and who show little sign of being uncomfortable about this.

Our recommendations (see the end of this report) are guided by the following principles and aims:

1. Actively promote the construction of deeper and closer ties between parties and the electorate.
2. Divert funding away from party central offices and to local constituencies or regions.
3. Encourage greater participation by all UK citizens in terms of voting, party membership and activism.
4. Stop facilitating the Duopoly and recognize that it is now a historical relic, incapable of articulating the aspirations of the UK electorate in the 21st century.



1. Introduction

It is uncontroversial to point to a crisis in the way that UK politics is funded. But it is impossible to discuss party funding in the UK without placing the whole debate – and the current ongoing “crisis” of party funding – in a wider context of what is happening to UK politics. In particular there are two critical phenomena that must be addressed; firstly the domination of UK politics by a governing duopoly of the Labour and Conservative parties and secondly the collapse in the popular legitimacy of that Duopoly, a collapse which has been under way for 35 years and which is on-going.

This report therefore argues that any discussion of party funding that does not examine the wider crisis of UK democracy is an exercise in deckchair rearrangement. The fact is that no matter how one measures it, democracy in the UK has now reached a point of near-collapse. Record lows of voter turnout and voter registration levels have been matched by a record turn away from the two main parties – despite the fact that these are the only parties that can win under a First Past The Post (FPTP) electoral system. Amongst some urban sections of the youngest demographic of the electorate, only one in ten actually turned out and voted for one of the Labour or Conservative parties in 2010, meaning that 90% either actively or passively rejected the governing parties offered.

We further argue that this collapse in support for the political elite is utterly inseparable from the artificially-maintained electoral dominance of the two main parties under FPTP. This has led to the creation of a duopoly whose grasp on power has become

self-perpetuating and who have been completely unable to reform a system whose principle beneficiaries are themselves.

The extent of the collapse in popular support can be measured by the failure of the duopoly to establish a majority government in the 2010 General Election and the creation of the first peace time coalition government in a lifetime. At the same time a series of very public scandals have revealed a degree of ‘sleaze’, corruption and mendacity amongst politicians, journalists, big business, the police and – repeatedly – the banks, which has utterly shaken public confidence in the principal pillars of the British state.

At the political level, the omens for the Coalition were never good and they have not improved in their first two years in office. The failure of the Liberal Democrat party elites to win any significant reform of FPTP and their abandonment of significant pre-election promises in order to join the government has added to the sense of political crisis.

Even the most hardened insider-duopolites appear to understand that they need to act to avert further crisis and win back public support and significant concessions are being offered. David Cameron felt forced to order a full judicial enquiry into the behaviour of the Press – an inquiry that has proved deeply embarrassing to him and his party – whilst Ed Milliband has offered a £5,000 contribution cap to political parties (although he has once again ducked the Union funding question). Momentum is building for a full judicial enquiry into the banking industry. It may be that the few years leading up to the 2015 general Election offer a historic opportunity to extract



democratic reform out of a duopoly which is both deeply entrenched, but also deeply embattled, failing in credibility and anxious to renew its popular mandate.

This report suggests some measures which might help restore public faith in the democratic process and which may be achievable in the current climate.



2. The Duopoly and its collapse.

The Duopoly is the two party system in the UK. It is itself primarily created by the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system that eliminates all but two parties from serious participation in governing politics meaning that the Labour and Conservative parties have effectively closed political debate to all other voices.

The collapse in popular legitimacy of the two main parties can be measured in the hard electoral data. In the 1950s the UK had 85% turnouts on near 100% registration rates with 97% of those voting, voting for the Duopoly – over 80% of people. The equivalent figure now is less than half that – below 35% (65% vote x 65% turnout x 82% registration rate¹) – yet these two parties are still the only game in town as far as power goes. In fact we're at the point where twice as many people don't vote for the Duopoly as do, despite the fact that only these two parties can form a government. **That means that two thirds of the electorate vote for a party that has no hope of forming government, don't vote or don't even bother to register.** In May 2010 the Conservative Party were chosen by fewer than one in five of the electorate, whilst Labour managed to attract fewer than one in six – and yet that election was widely understood beforehand to be the closest for decades and arguably the most worth voting in. It seems that General Elections are travelling down the same path already taken by local elections in the UK, where councillors are routinely elected on turnouts that are under 25%, meaning that they may be actively voted for by less than 10% of their ward electorate.

In addition, it is estimated that party membership as a proportion of the voting-age population declined from reported figures of 10% in 1960-64, to 5.9% in 1975-79, 2.6% in 1985-89 and (for the Duopoly) just 0.6% in 2010, “a particularly stark decline compared to other western democracies”². **We live in a country where a complex multi-party electorate has been shoe-horned into a two-sizes-fits-all political duoculture.**

The Duopoly and its collapse; future trends

All measures point to the likelihood that the collapse in support for the Duopoly will gain momentum in the future.

For example registration rates are not just falling as a proportion of the population – between 2002-2004 there was an **absolute** fall of 560,000 voters on the electoral register during a decade when population has increased at its fastest rate in UK history.³

Moreover these effects are also consistently more pronounced the younger the demographic examined. In 2010 the Electoral Commission found that registration rates were as low as 73% in urban districts such as Lambeth in south London, but that figure dropped to only 44% among 18-24 year old voters.⁴ Since voter turnout amongst 18-24 year olds was the lowest of any age group (just 37%⁵) this means that amongst some urban parts of this demographic the proportion voting for the Duopoly parties was as low as 10-11%, with nine times as many either abstaining, voting elsewhere or not bothering to register.



By contrast turnout amongst those aged 65+ (at over 75%) was twice as high as that of the youngest group, and older people are also much more likely to be registered to vote. The younger you are the less likely you are to be registered and the less likely you are to turn up on election day anyway. Eventually the practical pressures of modern politics mean that a positive feedback loop develops here; as the

young cease to vote, so their needs and wishes are increasingly ignored in the Duopoly parties' policies which makes them even less likely to feel that voting is a means to altering their life chances. Increasingly, the elderly are the last redoubt of the Duopoly.

At what point in the future will the Duopoly lose its right to govern? Have we reached that point already?



3. 2010: The Coalition.

The steady collapse in the Duopoly's democratic legitimacy has culminated in the 2010 election result in which neither of the Duopolites were capable of securing a mandate from the electorate: we have a Conservative Prime Minister, who only one in five British adults voted for. Only time will tell whether this turns out to be a historical turning point but already (in 2012) many pollsters are predicting that a majority for either duopolite party in 2015 is unlikely. The co-option of the Liberal Democrats into government is the first formal breach in the Duopoly since the Second World War and the first peacetime breach since 1931.

The long-term consequences of the Coalition are of course still unknowable but it seems clear that the short term consequences will be fairly disastrous for the Lib Dems who have seen extraordinary and dramatic falls in their vote in the 2 years since entering government. The consequences of this for democracy are hard to predict but it is hard to see how this is likely to re-invigorate UK democracy. Some disenchanted Lib-Dem voters will return to the Duopoly giving it a short-term boost, but it is likely that many will not – the provisional evidence from the 2012 local elections is that the Duopoly received about the same proportion of the vote as they did in the 2010 General Election, despite a huge drop in the Lib Dem vote.



4. The Collapse in Democracy; Local Government

The collapse in voting at the national level is put in the shade by the collapse at the local level. In 2012 the local elections saw a national turnout of less than one third. Although this was technically the lowest turnout for 12 years, it is by no means atypical – roughly two thirds of registered voters have given up voting in local elections for the past quarter of a century – including the unregistered, this means that nearly 75% of the electorate do not bother turn out. Turnouts of one third, on national registration rates of 82% give the Duopoly the active assent of just 17% of the electorate at local government level⁶. At local level, nearly five times as many people don't vote for the Duopoly as do and the percentage of electors voting for the winning duopoly candidate at local level is typically below 10% or 15%.

A full analysis of the reasons for the collapse in participation in local democracy in the UK is complex and beyond the scope of this paper.⁷ However it seems clear that the collapse in voting at local level has marched steadily in step with the decrease in power of local government compared to central government. Different analyses provide different levels of the percentage of tax raised by local government in the UK – from less than 10%⁸ to about 16%.⁹ But either way, the figure is the lowest of any OECD country except the former British colony, Ireland. In federal states such as the USA and Germany the figures are much higher, as one would expect (62% and 66% respectively), but even in notionally highly centralised states such as France

the figure is 65%. UK local government is amongst the weakest in the world.

In addition to being almost completely dependent on central government for its funding, local government can have its only tax-raising power (Council Tax) “capped” by central government, it may have statutory obligations imposed on it and may find itself subject to demands to follow “best practice” means of implementation that even take away its ability to decide how to implement central policy.

In the words of one report, “*Town Halls are increasingly stuck in the middle, left to merely rubber-stamp budgets which are set de facto by central government.*”¹⁰ Moreover, since 1997 there has been a sharp increase in the amount of local government funding that has been ring fenced for specific purposes by central government, effectively preventing local governments from setting their own local priorities.

And this is a relatively new phenomenon; in the period 1900-1980 UK local government was roughly 70% self-financing – and for the whole of that period local election turnouts were a minimum of 30% higher than in the past 25 years – and usually much higher than that. Further evidence that voters respond to the degree of autonomy of local government comes from Europe. Countries which have local governments that have higher levels of effective power also have electoral turnouts that are much higher than the UK – levels of 70% are normal in France and Germany.

Moreover, since UK local government's only revenue raising power – Council Tax – accounts for



just 23% of local spending, any local government that wants to increase spending by just 1% must raise Council Tax by roughly 4.5%. This is problematic enough in itself but councils are unable to choose where the tax burden falls, or rather they are forced to place this burden on low income households due to Council Tax's regressive design. The maximum variation in council tax banding is a multiple of 3, when the values of the houses taxed may vary by a multiple of 10 or more. In many urban metropolitan areas outside the south east almost all residents are in Band A or B making the Council Tax effectively a flat tax – no different from the Poll Tax which it was supposed to replace.

UK voters are not fools; the systematic undermining of local government's power over the past 30 years has made participation in it largely pointless for the overwhelming majority of them and they have acted accordingly. However this should not be taken as evidence that they do not care; as other observers have pointed out, they are "resigned, not apathetic" – rather than

simply "not caring", 91% describe themselves as "dissatisfied" with their local council.¹¹

The particular significance of the collapse of local democracy for the national picture is that it has stifled the principle means of breaking into the national political scene for 'outsider parties', new entrants into the political field. Where once local government allowed a motivated and active new group to work locally and demonstrate their ideas on a small scale, it is now largely neutered and little more than a branch of policy administration on behalf of central government. Local government in the UK now is almost bereft of meaningful decision-making power.

By crushing the regional sections of the Duopoly parties and preventing any meaningful trialling of new parties, the destruction of local democracy has hugely empowered both the party elites and the elite parties and has been a key part of the creation of the all-strangling national political Duopoly.



5. The collapse in democratic legitimacy, party funding and State funding of politics.

The collapse in party memberships is of course partly responsible for the funding crisis since parties have lost large amounts of income previously available from membership fees. It is estimated that the share of membership fees in the central income of the Duopoly in the UK decreased from 49% in 1975-9 to 25% in 1993-7. By 2005, membership fees accounted for only 10% of Labour party income and just 3.5% of Conservative party income.¹² And as the proportion of party income contributed by membership fees fell, so the proportion raised via large donations has grown and the inevitable corruption issues relating to large donations have come increasingly under the spotlight. In addition, the withering of the membership base has taken away the foot soldiers of party political campaigns, who deliver leaflets, publicise meetings and maintain a presence in their communities, leaving parties increasingly dependent on expensive media alternatives and remote from the ordinary concerns of the electorate as a whole.

And so, increasingly, the debate on party funding has turned to an either/or; either parties are funded by private donations from the super-wealthy – a process which effectively institutionalises corruption – or the state must step in and fund political parties to prevent their impoverishment. The trouble is that there is evidence that most people dislike both options. The response of those given the task of solving the

problem has been blunt; in the words of Sir Christopher Kelly, Chairman of the Committee for Standards in Public Life, the public "cannot have it both ways" by opposing the role of big money in politics, and also opposing increased state funding.

But in our opinion this is a false dichotomy. There is nothing contradictory about the public being opposed to both large donations *and* opposing increased state funding; to see a contradiction is to assume that the public want to see more of the same. In fact – as the historical record laid out above clearly shows – the public are voting for something quite different; or not bothering to vote at all. The public are being utterly consistent in seeking to end the corrupt culture of the big donors *and* to refuse to give further money to the governing parties that have ceased to represent anything more than a small minority of the population, and who show little sign of being uncomfortable about this.

In fact all justifications for a solution along the lines of Kelly's 2011 proposals¹³ are in effect saying that because the public no longer *voluntarily* support the parties, they must be *forced* to do so in the form of taxation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, politicians' gut instincts have told them that this might not go down well at a time of austerity and high levels of political cynicism and all three main parties quickly came out to dismiss Kelly's proposals as unacceptable.

The then Conservative party chair, Lady Warsi, said *"the public will simply not accept a plan to hand over almost £100m of taxpayers' money to*



*politicians", whilst Liberal Democrat Chair Tim Farron said "now is not the time for more public money to be spent on politicians."*¹⁴

Actually there is plenty of poll data that contradicts these claims but this will be discussed below.



6. To Fund or Not to Fund? That *isn't* the question...

To a large extent the debate about state funding for parties in Britain is based on a major falsehood, namely that we do not have state funding already. We do. Ignoring very significant payments in kind such as free access to television for Party Political Broadcasts or free postage for election communications (which are hard to price realistically), the Duopoly already receive large cash payments in the form of Short Money, made to whichever of

the parties is in opposition¹⁵. In 2010/11, the Labour Party received £5.2million and in the year 2011/12 will receive over £6million. None of the polling conducted into public attitudes to state funding appears to have asked respondents whether they are aware of these payments and it would be a safe guess that the majority of them are not. The responses by the likes of Warzi and Farron quoted above makes it clear that representatives of the Duopoly are not particularly keen to enlighten them.



7. Short Money & Cranborne Money; how the Duopoly feathers its own nest.

When Labour introduced “Short Money” in 1975, making the first systematic state payments to opposition parties, they were unlikely to be opposed by the opposition Conservative Party, but even less so by the impoverished Liberal Party on whom Labour were clearly becoming dependent in the House of Commons, a dependence eventually marked by the “Lib-Lab pact” of 1977. A casual observer might be forgiven for thinking that Labour effectively bribed the Liberal Party into what was a de facto coalition (although technically it remained a mere “pact” in order to avoid the Liberals losing their ‘opposition’ status and hence funding, and also perhaps in order to avoid contamination of the Liberals’ political identity). Thereafter Labour were themselves the largest recipient of Short Money for 18 of the following 22 years. Of course, they did not expect to be out of government for so long but there is no doubt that they did expect to be the majority recipients in the medium term.

Exactly the same process underlay the introduction of Cranborne Money for opposition peers in the Lords, introduced in November 1996 by the Conservative Party as the polls indicated a sweeping victory for Labour at the next General Election less than six months away. Cranborne

money bankrolled Conservative peers for 13 of the following 14 years, including of course many of the outgoing cabinet who themselves became opposition peers shortly after deciding that the opposition party in the Lords should receive state funding.

The point here is not simply that each party acts in its own advantage, but that increasingly the rules of the game are such that each agrees to turn a blind eye to the sly grabs of the other, knowing that so long as these grabs are skewed in favour of the governing two, both will benefit in the long run. **But since the underlying cause of the parties’ need for money in the first place is that they have lost the active support of the majority of the people they claim to represent, neither has the courage to publically argue for such funding.**

In many ways this is analogous to the process by which individual MPs crept slowly into utterly untenable positions with their own expenses claims. Their pleas that they were encouraged into dubious claims by party elites and the Parliamentary Fees Office fell on deaf ears with a scandalised public but the truth may be closer to this than has been allowed. We assume that the upper echelons of the Duopoly, embarrassed by the political hot potato of M.P.’s wages, simply encouraged them to bend the rules instead. The line between what was acceptable and what was not became completely smudged encouraging a culture of venality in parliament.



8. The Elephant in The Lobby; First Past The Post.

It is striking that many of the solutions offered to the present long, drawn out, party funding crisis end up proposing a 'pay per vote' element. Indeed the most serious proposal from within the political establishment, Sir Christopher Kelly's report for the Committee into Standards in Public Life, does just that. Since Kelly must attempt to find a solution that is acceptable to the Duopoly (it has been agreed that any solution must be via a cross-party consensus) he is bound to try and find a formula that suits them. Observers of the two party system will recognise the self-interest that underwrites a pay per vote proposal – since the Duopolites retain 65% of the (shrinking) vote, they will pocket the bulk of the money. However we should also recognise that a pay-per-vote system does constitute a small theoretical redistribution of public money *away* from the Duopoly since at present party funding via Short Money is mainly linked to the number of Parliamentary seats won by a party (as opposed to overall vote share) effectively a huge bonus for the Duopoly. In the current year (2011/12), the Labour Party get three times as much money for the number of seats they hold, as for the number of votes they win. (There are also funding streams specifically reserved for the Duopoly - just under £1million for the leader of the Opposition, his/her office and their Whips). We also note that 'pay-per-vote' would at least have a small impact against the Duopoly by virtue of offering a partial rejoinder to the 'wasted vote' argument that tends to punish smaller parties under FPTP: even if one's vote is 'wasted' in terms of not being likely to affect the outcome of the election, it will at least bring a (small but) tangible financial

benefit to the small party one supports, thus helping it to challenge more strongly in future.

But before we get carried away with enthusiasm for 'pay per vote', we should also recall that the removal of the per-seat subsidy to the two main parties would be more than compensated for by the huge increase in overall Labour and Conservative receipts via the extension of funding to the governing party.

Furthermore, the basic question needs to be asked, why *should* state funding for political parties be made on a per-vote basis? The obvious putative answer is that this is the fairest system because it accurately reflects the preferences of the voting public who will be asked to pay. But this then begs the question, why shouldn't *M.P.s* be elected on the basis of the number of votes cast by the public? **If the fairest way to distribute party funds is by proportional representation then surely the far more important question of distribution of Parliamentary seats should be settled in the same way?**

But as well as raising once again its democratic or moral shortcomings, focussing on FPTP raises many other practical problems that feed back into the funding question.

Firstly, as argued above, the Duopoly that is the inevitable result of FPTP means that any funding debate will be dominated by the requirements of the Duopoly continuing a culture of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. This remains a workable democracy so long as the main parties can still attract the support of the majority, but when that support has evaporated the democracy is no longer functional and



this means that any debate about funding is shrouded in the self-interest and hypocrisy of the parties that dominate it. The two main parties are unable to directly campaign for state funding since they fear the backlash it would provoke; but this backlash is against *them* not necessarily against the principle of state funding.

Secondly, FPTP has undermined wider democratic legitimacy by driving electioneering into the numerically tiny sphere of the marginal constituencies, meaning that the parties have gradually abandoned the vast majority of the electorate as irrelevant. This obviously undermines the maintenance of democratic relations between parties and voters and means that any state-funded party spending will be dominated by strategic decisions made by central party elites and concentrated in just a handful of constituencies – just as the non-state funding currently received by the parties already is. Moreover the ‘marginal problem’ is getting worse; the number of Labour-Conservative marginals has fallen from an average of 160 in the period 1955-66 to just 86 in 2010¹⁶. As the number falls so fewer and fewer voters exert greater amounts of power and are courted more and more intensively by elite parties. In 1997 Weir and Bentham argued that 500,000 voters would have changed the election result¹⁷; by 2007 the Electoral Reform Society was arguing that the result could have been swung by just 8000 voters spread across 30 key marginal.¹⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, turnout in ultra marginal seats is 10% higher than in ultra safe ones.

Thirdly, in creating a Duopoly, FPTP creates what – in an economic context – could be called a cross between a ‘natural monopoly’, i.e. a market that

new competitors are unable to enter because the initial costs are too high, and an oligopoly, i.e. a market which is controlled by dominant players whose appearance of competition masks the fact that they collude to exclude all new entrants. The debate about justifications for government subsidy is complex (and of course ideologically charged) but considerable agreement can be found in arguing that subsidies are justified in order to *break up* natural monopolies or oligopolies and increase competition. State funding for political parties under FPTP based on their current status under FPTP does exactly the opposite; it preserves entrenched privilege and reinforces the same processes that are leading to the electorate’s disaffiliation from the present system. It leaves our democracy unable to respond to rapid social, economic, demographic and environmental change, governed instead by two parties deeply rooted in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Fourthly, as third parties gain more and more of the vote (and even some parliamentary representation – up from just 8 seats at their nadir, 1955, to 92 in the 2005 Parliament), FPTP increasingly mistranslates votes into seats. Curtice notes that, “...elections since 1983 have consistently produced results which are more disproportional than those in the immediate post-war decades.”¹⁹ All of the above problems relate to *any* form of state funding for parties in a failing two party system, created and sustained by a failing electoral system. But in addition there are very specific problems relating to state funding based on pay-per-vote in a political system dominated by a Duopoly. Voting behaviour under FPTP is distorted by the very heavy media focus on the two main parties (and corresponding media blackout on



alternatives) and of course by the pressure to vote tactically. Both of these factors drive large numbers of voters to vote against their true preferences and means that pay-per vote is not delivering the monetary preferences of voters in exactly the same way that FPTP fails to deliver their political preferences. **If voters are not only virtually forced to vote for parties they do not actually endorse but to pay for that privilege too, the system is adding insult to injury and is unlikely to restore the**

broken connection between the parties and the people.

If evidence were needed that FPTP is no longer successful in allowing the British people to articulate their democratic wishes, one only needs to see the notable successes of small parties in all elections that are proportional – from UKIP in the Euro-elections or the Greens in the London Assembly to the extraordinary victory of the SNP in the Scottish Parliament in 2011.



9. The Good News

The good news is that the British people don't appear to have given up on participatory democracy. When the General Election turnout in 2001 slumped to a new low of just 59%, New Labour's chosen spin was to dub this a new phenomenon; "happathy". Apparently the public were so delighted with their government that they simply couldn't be bothered to participate in its election. The evidence does not support their analysis. The Power Inquiry (2005) conducted a 'Citizen's Audit' of Britain and found that over a twelve-month period 62% of British people donated money to a political or campaigning organisation, 30% helped raise money for a political or campaigning organisation, 42% signed a petition, 25% contacted a public official, and 13% contacted a politician in an effort to change laws or policies²⁰. The people have lost faith in politics dominated by the two main parties but they haven't lost faith altogether.

So then, what should we make of Sir Christopher Kelly's assertion of a 'contradiction' in the public's desire for spending caps on the one hand and refusal to provide state funding on the other? Well part one of that proposition seems true - in the words of the Commons Constitutional Affairs Committee, "*public opinion is remarkably consistent in its dislike of private donations, primarily because of an objection to the possibility of buying influence.*"²¹ A MORI poll in 2003 found that 70% of respondents agreed that funding political parties by voluntary donations was unfair because of '*the risk that wealthy individuals, businesses and trade unions could buy influence over parties*'²², while 73% agreed with this

statement in an ICM poll in 2004, with 74% further agreeing that there should be a limit on donations²³. A Populus poll for the Times conducted in March 2006 found that 79% of respondents agreed that there should be a limit on the amount of money that can be donated to any political party to remove the risk of people trying to buy influence or favours²⁴. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified that in April 2006 59% of respondents supported a donations cap, a majority of more than two-to-one over those who opposed it (24%)²⁵.

But it is the second half of Sir Christopher Kelly's 'contradiction' that doesn't stand up well. Opposition to the state funding of political parties does not seem anywhere near as strong as he suggests. In 2004, an ICM poll found that 62% of respondents agreed that political parties with significant public support should be provided with public funds to limit their dependency on donation from wealthy individuals, businesses and trade unions, while 59% agreed that there should be some element of funding from taxation for political parties.²⁶ By 2006, 41% of respondents agreed that political parties with significant public support should be provided with public funds to reduce their dependency on donations from wealthy individuals, trade unions and businesses, and only 36% disagreed with this statement.²⁷ Indeed, in the 2006 State of the Nation Poll, nearly 3-1 – or 50% for versus 17% against – of the public backed state funding for political parties.²⁸ Qualitative research undertaken by the Electoral Commission indicated that when informed of an estimate as to how much public funding of political parties might cost each tax payer they felt this to be a small price to pay for the benefits that result.²⁹



But while they understand that a case can be made for state funding, the public aren't interested in handing over blank cheques to the two main parties. A very clear picture emerges of what the public want their money spent on – basically anything which re-invigorates grass roots democratic participation (and – by clear implication – cuts the power of the party elites and the elite parties, i.e. the Duopoly). Thus work carried out by Mori for the EC³⁰ reports that,

*'A linking thread uniting all the needs articulated by participants was the desire for **increased democratic engagement and greater closeness between parties and the public**...it was the central issue underpinning the principles for party funding formulated by participants'* [Mori's emphasis]

Moreover when pressed on what would be acceptable uses of public funding for political parties, Mori found that focus group participants supported, *'...activities [such as] ...attempting to increase turnout, campaigning at a local level, [and] engaging young people in politics'*. Poll data cited by the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Commons corroborates this qualitative evidence. They stated that, *'if there is to be increased state funding for political parties, there is **overwhelming public support for this funding being targeted to support local activity by parties**. 59% of respondents supported this, against less than one fifth who opposed it (18%)'*³¹, [emphasis added].

It seems that voters' gut instincts tell them that mending the broken relationship between the parties and the people is best done by getting back to local contact – and the academic evidence supports that instinct. The New Policy Network has argued that in marginal constituencies in particular, parties often compensated for a lack of activists by using direct mail or national advertising, which may be an effective campaigning mechanism but does not provide personal contact between the public and their representatives. They further warned that if over successive election campaigns a person has never been canvassed personally and has not met either the candidate or a representative of the party, then the likelihood of their having a positive view of politics and politicians and consequently of turning out to vote tends to drop significantly. A study by Denver, Hands, Fisher and MacAllister found that even in the 'best case scenarios' (i.e. in marginal target seats) only 50% of the electorate was canvassed in the 2001 General Election campaign³². In non-target seats, this figure fell to 18% for the Labour and Conservative parties and 8% for the Liberal Democrats. The Electoral Commission also argues that voters respond better to local communication that engages them directly and makes politics more relevant than national level political advertising³³. Based on a survey of the available research to date, Justin Fisher and David Denver concluded that campaigning methods which required voluntary effort were the 'most effective'³⁴.



10 Political Parties

The theoretical purpose

It seems clear that a majority of the public want reinvigorated political parties with power radically redistributed away from the centre and down from the top. **That's what they say when they're asked, and the poll and election data shows that when they get it, they remain engaged and when they don't, they lose interest.**

This certainly corresponds to the theoretical role of political parties in representative government. They can be described as institutionalized mediators between civil society and the formal government of the state; they enable their members' and supporters' demands to be represented in government. As such they have four key roles:

1. Mobilisation of citizens.
Primarily in the form of members and activists, secondarily in the form of voters and 'undecideds' etc;
2. Education of citizens.
Explaining policy, explaining the functioning of the political system, 'generating values';
3. Formulation of policy.
Aggregating competing demands and converting them into coherent general policies. Engaging in a two-way process with members to shape opinions into viable policy options; and
4. Recruitment and training of candidates for public office.

Broadly speaking tasks (1) and (2) represent the "democratic" aspect of their role, tasks (3) and (4) the "governmental" aspect. The data

makes it clear that the governing parties in Britain are failing – and failing badly – in three out of four of these vital functions. **The only task that the governing parties are successfully fulfilling is the recruitment and training of new elites – but without the first three functions these are elites that no longer have democratic legitimacy.** The data seems pretty consistent – the public are asking for tasks 1-3 to be performed properly – and they appear to be willing to pay to see that happen.

The practical requirement.

The decline in party membership has been noted elsewhere in this report. But reversing this process will involve more than incentivising parties to increase their memberships by making state funding dependent on it (see Recommendations). People will need to be incentivised to join (or re-join) parties by making their memberships more meaningful. We have argued above that the very clearly evidenced disengagement from local politics in the UK is correlated with the lack of purpose to engagement; as local government has become a rubberstamp for central government, so voters have stopped bothering to vote in local elections. It seems likely that a parallel process underlies at least some of the collapse in party membership in the UK. The undermining of party members' ability to determine party policy has been most pronounced within the Labour Party – but this is at least partly a consequence of the Labour Party having previously had the most democratic conference of the main parties; it would be hard to 'undermine' democratic participation in the Conservative Party Conference



since historically there has never been any formal participation to undermine.

But parties rightly fear internal democratization since memberships are usually more partisan ‘true believers’ than the floating voters that party leaders are seeking to win over and thus the Duopoly party elites have sought to reduce membership power and to enhance the power of the central elites in order to achieve ‘electability’. The obvious solution to this impasse is that *all* political parties in receipt of state funding should have a minimum level of membership participation in policy-formation imposed upon them. At the moment internal democracy is a disadvantage to a party since it makes departure from the status quo more likely, exposing the party to media attack. But an across-the-board requirement would ensure that all parties ‘suffer’ the same general level of disadvantage. The likely practical

outcome is that the Duopoly parties would start to become more ideologically distinct from each other as party activists were able to articulate their real preferences. For example we would expect the Conservative party to become distinctly more ‘Euro-sceptic’, and the Labour Party more left of centre. But whatever the outcome we would expect the increase in members’ power to lead automatically to an increase in membership levels. This, in itself, would start to free parties from their dependence on sugar-daddy donors.

If taxpayers are to be asked to pay for political parties – particularly in a FPTP electoral system which excludes meaningful participation from alternative voices - they must be given realistic opportunities to define the policies of those parties.



11. Ed Milliband's Proposals

In suggesting a £5,000 contribution cap, the Leader of the Opposition may have produced a game-changer. There is certainly a case for calling this proposal the most morally honest contribution to the funding debate to have come from within the Duopoly. If enacted, it would undoubtedly mean a radical redistribution of power away from a small wealthy elite who currently effectively write party policy in the Duopoly – or at least exercise a power of veto over it. As such, anyone interested in extending or preserving British democracy should welcome it; it is without question a bold move and also a courageous one since it will clearly cost Labour considerably.

Naturally, analysis of the proposal has tended to home in on what Labour's relative advantage might be from its implementation (and there are certainly grounds for thinking that this cap would harm the Conservative Party more in the foreseeable future). But the most obvious way in which Milliband's proposal does favour Labour is in its insistence that the 'opt out' of the Trade Union political levy be retained; and this requires some discussion.

The TU Political Levy

At present Trades Unions' ability to make payments to political parties – or indeed to spend money on any political campaign – are highly regulated. The UK's largest Union (and Labour's largest Union funder), Unison, gives members the option of contributing to a General Political Fund, an Affiliated Political Fund (which will go to Labour) or to no fund at all. The idea that Labour's receipts from these

sources are somehow coerced is thus not entirely fair. Even the right to have a Political Fund at all (which allows Unions to campaign on any issues outside of their direct role as an employees organisation) must be ratified by ballot every ten years. No union has ever had a 'no' vote for one of these ballots, indeed the victory margins are generally huge.

As such it is clear that the opt-in/opt-out debate is something of a red herring. Any trade union member who wishes not to pay into the Labour Party is perfectly able to avoid doing so – or of course not to join a Trade Union in the first place. However there remains a clear likelihood that an opt-out system unduly benefits the Labour Party from passive, possibly unaware, support from Union members who may not support the Labour Party – and Labour's fervent defence of the opt-out method suggests that they suspect that this might be a considerable number. The data are not conclusive but in 2001 there were approximately 643,000 TU members who had opted out against 4,419,165 paying the levy (although it is not clear if all of these were paying the affiliated levy) – an opt-out rate of just over 12%. According to the 2005 British Election Study, 45.7 % of current trade union members voted Labour in the 2005 General Election, 22.1 % Liberal Democrat and 19 % Conservative³⁵. Either a considerable number of Union members are happy to pay one way and vote the other, or there is a significant 'opt-out effect' working in Labour's favour here. On the other hand it also makes it abundantly clear that Trades Unionists, considered en masse, prefer Labour to the other parties by a huge margin (though notably they are still only a minority of Trades Unionists).



It is hard to know exactly what effect an opt-in system would have. When the Conservative peer Lord Feldman lobbied the Committee for Standards in Public Life to change to an opt-in system, he cited an opt-out rate of just 8.8% and contrasted this with the experience of Trade Unions in Northern Ireland where an opt-in system yielded just 35.7% of members. However the very reason why an opt-in system was adopted in NI was because of the political complexities of the NI situation – neither the Conservative or Labour Parties stand candidates there and northern Irish trades union members are unable to vote for either party. Moreover the primary political split in NI has been a semi-sectarian one between Unionism and Irish Nationalism which has produced a strong tradition of conservative (i.e. Unionist) voting trade unionists. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that an opt-in system in the rest of the UK would produce such low results and Feldman's submission is self-serving and unhelpfully partisan.

In addition, Labour can cite the last in depth review of the law relating to trade union political expenditure by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1998. The Committee recommended that that there should be no change to the existing position on the grounds that the existing law appeared to be working well.

However the fact that the opt-in/opt-out debate is, to a large extent, not much more than a way for the Conservative Party to muddy the funding waters and draw attention away from its own (completely unaccountable) receipts from a small

super-wealthy elite does not mean that Labour can escape this issue. It is not just facts but perceptions that matter here. The fact is that polling on party funding indicates that ordinary people tend to favour state funding to the extent that it takes away the influence of the big funders – and that clearly includes the Trades Unions. Moreover if, as Labour tend to argue, the opt-out is a perfectly adequate safeguard for union members, then they should have little to fear from the opt-in; Labour can't have it both ways, on this point. Converting passive support into active will require some work (and will probably cost the party some passive supporters) but that might be a price worth paying for the strategic gain for Labour in converting to the opt-in. Firstly – and regardless of the wider history that exists between the trades unions and the Labour Party – it is morally dubious to take money from Trades Unionists who do not support Labour and it leaves Labour looking shifty.

If Labour were brave enough to recommend moving to an 'opt-in' system, that would leave the Conservative Party badly exposed – and will then make it much harder for them to oppose a £5,000 spending limit.

It is also not clear to us why Trades Unionists are in the great majority of cases offered the option only of making an 'affiliated' contribution to the Labour Party, rather than to other Parties. This is a live issue, now that a few unions have started to give money to other Parties than Labour (e.g. the Fire Brigades Union has given some money to the Green Party, in recognition of its support of striking firemen).



12. Recommendations

If one accepts the premise that UK democracy is undergoing a process of catastrophic but, in principle, correctable decline and that *this* is the fundamental cause of the “party funding problem” then it is also clear that it is the democratic decline that must be addressed in order to solve the funding problem. No tinkering with party funding mechanisms that does not incorporate the addressing of this decline will work. If the goal is ‘re-democratising’ UK politics, then a fairly straight-forward set of ‘design principles’ can be defined which will generate policies that will encourage this process.

Any recommendation must:

1. Actively promote the construction of deeper and closer ties between parties and the electorate; and
2. Divert funding away from party central offices and to local constituencies or regions.³⁶

In doing (1) and (2) these design principles will automatically:

3. Encourage greater participation by all UK citizens in terms of voting, party membership and activism; and
4. Stop facilitating the Duopoly and recognize that it is now a historical relic, incapable of articulating the aspirations of the UK electorate in the 21st century.

In doing (3) and (4) the design principles will also legitimise state spending on political parties and at the

same time cut the Duopoly parties’ dependence on political sugar daddies.

Structural Recommendations

1. Electoral Reform; the replacement of FPTP with a genuine form of proportional representation for Parliamentary Elections.
2. Structural Reform; the return to local government of the level of autonomy that it enjoyed until the 1980s.

Although both these recommendations step outside what might be called the ‘classic terrain’ of the party funding discussion it is our contention that any reform of party funding that does not include these measures will be little more than window-dressing and – as such – a time-wasting precursor to the next funding scandal.

Procedural Recommendations

1. That any state funding for political parties must be based primarily on parties’ membership levels by match-funding (or more-than-match-funding) for membership subscriptions.
2. That state funding based on (1) go to constituency parties, not central party offices.
3. That the Milliband donation cap of £5,000 be adopted.
4. That the Trade Union levy should be made an opt-in.
5. That any political party in receipt of state funding must



offer a genuine participation in policy creation to members, including subsidized access to party conferences. That the best means of defining the qualifying degree of ‘policy democracy’ should be by a Royal Commission looking into internal party democracy.

6. That voters should also be able to donate a ‘per-vote’ contribution to the registered party of their choice (in the

same way that Trades Union members can donate to a political levy to the party of their choice) – or to no party at all if they do not wish to via a ‘none of the above’ box. There could be an additional right to donate to a political organization that is not a party (e.g. a pressure group), for those not wishing to donate their ‘per-vote’ payment to a party.



Endnotes

¹ It is important to note that registration rates are hard to estimate with absolute precision, the figure of 82.3% is the most recent estimate by the Electoral Commission, see *Six million eligible voters not registered, says Electoral Commission*. The Guardian, 14 December 2011.

² Kevin Casas-Zamora, (2005), 'Party Membership Trends in Western Europe 1960-1989' in *Paying for Democracy: Political Finance and State-funding for Parties*, (ECPR Press), p.48

³ *How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit*. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., Crone, S., Democratic Audit 2012

⁴ *Completeness and Accuracy of Electoral Registers in Great Britain*, London, The Electoral Commission 2010.

⁵ *General Election 2005 Research Paper*, p.73, section L, House of Commons Library, Research Paper 05/33.

⁶ Assuming that the proportion of votes going to the Duopoly is roughly the same as at the preceding General Election which appears to be the case although the national percentage figure for each party is hard to obtain for local elections.

⁷ In general terms, we are sympathetic to the kind of explanations offered by Colin Hay in his *Why we hate politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). Hay suggests, rather than the problem for why 'we' hate politics being with 'us', the voters (the usual, 'demand-side' explanation for falling turnouts), that British / contemporary politics in general faces a major 'supply-side' problem (a problem in the quality of the politics, representation and power it is able to offer electorates) that largely explains the catastrophic drop in turn-outs that are a central topic of this report. The less power an administrative body has, the lesser the degree of spontaneous participation it will attract. Where there is little power there is little interest; and so local elections suffer worst of all.

⁸ *Paying for Localism; How to revive local democracy by replacing VAT with a local sales tax*. Carswell, D., Adam Smith Institute 2004.

⁹ *Local Government Financial Statistics England*, No.19 2009.

¹⁰ *Paying for Localism; How to revive local democracy by replacing VAT with a local sales tax*. Carswell, D., Adam Smith Institute 2004.

¹¹ *Paying for Localism; How to revive local democracy by replacing VAT with a local sales tax*. Carswell, D., Adam Smith Institute 2004.

¹² See Party Accounts available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk

¹³ In brief; a £3 per vote payment and hugely reduced spending and donations caps.

¹⁴ *Reform party funding now or face another scandal, warns ethics chief*. The Guardian 22 November 2011

¹⁵ Short Money is paid to all parties with seats in Parliament, not just the Duopoly, but the formula for calculating it is skewed heavily in favour of the Duopolites.

¹⁶ Curtice, J. (2010) So What Went Wrong With The Electoral System? The 2010 Election result and the debate about electoral reform. *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 63, No.4, pp 623-638.

¹⁷ Weir and Beetham (1999), *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain*, London, Routledge.

¹⁸ *The Election That Never Was*, The Electoral Reform Society, 2007.



¹⁹ Curtice, J. (2010) So What Went Wrong With The Electoral System? The 2010 Election result and the debate about electoral reform. *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 63, No.4, pp 623-638.

²⁰ The Power Inquiry, available at: <http://www.power2010.org.uk/> (Cf. also www.powerinquiry.org/report/documents/PowertothePeople_002.pdf).

²¹ House of Commons Constitutional Affairs Committee *Party Funding First Report of Session 2006–07*

²² MORI (2003) Attitudes towards voting and the political process in 2003

²³ ICM State of the Nation Poll, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

²⁴ March 31st - April 2nd 2006 populuslimited.com

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ev 64, House of Commons Constitutional Affairs Committee, *Party Funding First Report of Session 2006–07*

²⁷ Ev 87, House of Commons Constitutional Affairs Committee, *Party Funding First Report of Session 2006–07*

²⁸ www.jrrt.org.uk

²⁹ The Electoral Commission (2004). Research undertaken by MORI

³⁰ Public Perspectives: The future of Party Funding in the UK, Final Report, Research Study conducted for the Electoral Commission/COI

³¹ Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs, *The Funding of Political Parties in the UK*, accessed on 22 October 2012 at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmconst/163/16307.htm>

³² D. Denver, G. Hands, J. Fisher, I. MacAllister (2002), 'The Impact of Constituency Campaigning in the 2001 General Election', in L. Bennie, C. Rallings, P. Webb (Eds), *British Elections and Parties Review* 12, Frank Cass, London, pp.80- 94

³³ Electoral Commission Report (2004), pp.59-61

³⁴ Justin Fisher and David Denver 'From Foot Slogging to Call Centres: Constituency Campaigning 1992-2005 prepared for the Political Studies Association Conference in April 2006; www.psa.ac.uk/2006/pps/Fisher.pdf

³⁵ N 621. House of Commons Library, analysis of 2005 British Election Study dataset.

³⁶ An alternative option for how to do this – a more radical route than we take in the present report – would be very strong and low limits on political spending, particularly spending at the national level. This would ride on the public's natural antipathy to state funding, and make political parties slimmer and closer to the grassroots, as for instance Plaid Cymru and the Green Party tend to be. The main problem we can see with this option, is that political parties do not operate in a vacuum. Weakening the parties makes all other players in the political process much stronger. These include the news media, corporate-funded lobbyists and 'thinktanks', PR agencies and the civil service. None of these bodies will ever be open to democratic control, but parties may be. Thus, with some regret, we don't go down this route in our recommendations below.

